

NEW SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

STORIES • INTERVIEWS • BOOK & FILM REVIEWS



STORIES MELANIE TEM • DAMIEN WALTERS GRINTALIS • CHRIS BUTLER
ANTONY MANN • CARLOS HERNANDEZ • **INTERVIEWED** PAUL CORNELL



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Flux is an occasional fiction supplement that we'll be sending out FREE to subscribers of *Interzone* + *Black Static*. The first *Flux* will be 'The Short, Glamorous Career of Aquaman & His Amazing Aquacide Machine' by Tyler Keevil.

The second *Flux* will be 'The Bigfoot House' by Tim Lees. The cover illustrations/design for *Flux* are by David Gentry.



To add *Black Static* to your *Interzone* subscription simply select the Dual Subscription option on the online shop (ttapress.com/shop) or inserted order form. If you ever have any queries just send an email to interzone@ttapress.com or any of the individuals listed overleaf, or raise them on the Interaction forum (ttapress.com/forum).



By the time you receive this issue the second TTA Novella – *Spin* by Nina Allan – will be at press, and should be ready to send out in the next *Interzone/Black Static* mailing in May. If you've already subscribed to TTA Novellas you need do nothing more. The original subscription offer is still running – £25 for five novellas, post-free to anywhere in the world – but you can of course buy *Spin* and any other novella by itself if you prefer. Again, just select the appropriate option on the online shop or on any order form. We hope you enjoy *Spin*, *Flux*, and IZ245. Please let us know!

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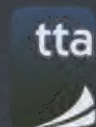
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FICTION



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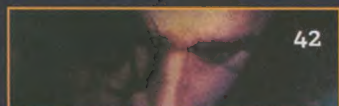
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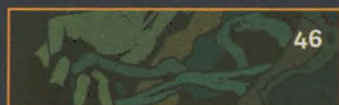
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DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

As Others See The Hobbit.

'Cate Blanchett has five solitary lines in *The Hobbit*, playing some sort of pretty princess, during one scene and has been placed there for matters of fluff and making film premieres actually worth photographing. / There are oak trees in *The Hobbit* with more input than Cate Blanchett has. Give me one bloody wisecracking woman Hobbit with a sword and a sense of derring-do!' (Grace Dent, *Independent*) The Jackson film trilogy *Rose Cotton, Barbarian Swordsman* remains far in the future.

Orson Scott Card's script assignment for DC Comics' digital *All-New Adventures of Superman* annoyed some fans who dislike his notorious diatribes against gay rights. A parody comic offered a Superman origin story with a new reason for Krypton's destruction: 'Gay marriage has doomed us all.' *The Hollywood Reporter* suggests that film company Summit may be worrying about its coming Card adaptation: 'Promoting *Ender's Game* without Card would be like trying to promote the first Harry Potter movie without J.K. Rowling', while unidentified studio executives are quoted as saying 'I don't think you take him to any fanboy event' and 'Keep him out of the limelight as much as possible.'

Awards. Crawford (fantasy): Karin Tidbeck, *Jagannath*. • Horror Writers Association, lifetime achievement: Clive Barker and Robert McCammon. • Heinlein Award: Allen Steele and Yoji Kondo. • Razzies (worst in cinema): dominated by *Twilight: Breaking Dawn, Part 1* with seven wins including Worst Picture.

William Shatner was unable to resist asking Chris Hadfield of

the Canadian Space Agency, 'Are you tweeting from space?' Reply from International Space Station: '@WilliamShatner Yes, Standard Orbit, Captain. And we're detecting signs of life on the surface.'

Nebula Shortlist. Novel: Saladin Ahmed, *Throne of the Crescent Moon*; Tina Connolly, *Ironskin*; N.K. Jemisin, *The Killing Moon*; Caitlín R. Kiernan, *The Drowning Girl*; Mary Robinette Kowal, *Glamour in Glass*; Kim Stanley Robinson, 2312. • Dramatic (Ray Bradbury Award): *The Avengers*; *Beasts of the Southern Wild*; *The Cabin in the Woods*; *The Hunger Games*; John Carter; *Looper*.

The Weakest Link: *Climate Change Dept.* Bradley Walsh: 'What Shakespeare play has the coldest season of the year in the title?' Contestant: 'A *Midsummer Night's Dream*.' (ITV, *The Chase*)

Adam West's Batmobile from the 1960s *Batman* TV series, a customised 1955 Lincoln Futura, sold at auction for \$4.2 million. Original cost in 1965: \$1, plus \$15,000 for the makeover. (*The Register*) Other past owners complained enviously that 'while I was at college my mother threw out my Batmobile.'

Bumper Court Circular. A 'mockbuster' film parody of *The Hobbit*, titled *Age of Hobbits* and timed for release three days before the Tolkien/Jackson epic, was blocked by a temporary restraining order from a US federal judge. The defendants, Global Asylum Ltd, claimed their title referred only to the nickname given by scientists to an ancient Indonesian human-oid subspecies: this wasn't taken terribly seriously. (*Variety*) • A 3D printed iPhone dock in the shape of the Iron Throne from *Game*

of Thrones has been ruthlessly suppressed by the rights owners HBO. (*Wired*) • The Tolkien estate's November lawsuit against the licensing of *Lord of the Rings* slot machines and online games (causing 'irreparable harm to Tolkien's legacy and reputation and the valuable goodwill generated by his works', ho hum) led to a counter-suit by our old friends the Saul Zaentz Co. (*Middle-earth News*) • Games Workshop lawyers decided the GW trademark on *Warhammer 40,000* 'Space Marines' extended beyond games into fiction, and persuaded Amazon to withdraw author M.C.A. Hogarth's unrelated ebook *Spots the Space Marine*. There was widespread outrage in sf circles, not always to the point (the fact that Heinlein wrote about space marines in 1948 carries little weight in trademark law); but Amazon presumably decided GW had over-reached, as Hogarth's book was reinstated three days after her despairing blog post about the ban.

Jane Yolen became the first woman to deliver the Andrew Lang Lecture since its founding at the University of St Andrews in 1927. (Tolkien's 'On Fairy Stories' was the 1939 Lang lecture.)

New Year Honours. Quentin Blake, illustrator of many children's fantasies including J.P. Martin's *Uncle* books and most of Roald Dahl, was knighted. Ewan McGregor, Obi-Wan Kenobi in the *Star Wars* prequels, has an OBE; so does scriptwriter (and fantasy author) Jeremy Lloyd, best known for TV sitcoms other than his sf *Come Back Mrs Noah* (1977–1978).

Thog's Masterclass. *Dept of Anatomy.* 'Hairs on her lower leg trembled as if they were on the



back of her neck.' (Ali Shaw, *The Girl with Glass Feet*, 2009) 'Now on the ferry, he looked at the white hairs dashing along his forearms and the backs of his hands.' (*Ibid*) 'When Midas spoke he fancied it came from his insides, maybe from some alliance of organs that didn't have a name.' (*Ibid*) 'She felt

a sudden clamminess in her gullet, an oyster swallowed wrong, dropping through her stomach and into her bowels, becoming a numbing absence beneath her knees.' (*Ibid*) • *Mannerly Homicide Dept.* 'I told him she had been strangled as gently as I could.' (Jody Shields, *The Fig Eater*, 2000) • *Eyeballs in*

the Sky. 'He finished his drink and let his eyes slide away from hers into the empty cup.' (Doyce Testerman, *Hidden Things*, 2012) • *Cunning Subterfuge Dept.* 'An elderly, uniformed man strolled out of a gatehouse disguised as a cantina.' (Harry Harrison and Marvin Minnsky, *The Turing Option*, 1992)

R.I.P.

Gerry Anderson (1929–2012), UK creator with his then wife Sylvia of a string of much-loved children's TV series using their 'SuperMarionation' puppet technique, died on 26 December; he was 83. A generation of British kids imprinted on such Anderson highlights as the 1960s *Supercar*, *Fireball XL5*, *Stingray*, *Thunderbirds*, *Captain Scarlet* and *Joe 90* – all featured on 2011 Royal Mail commemorative stamps.

Antonio Caronia (1944–2013), Italian sf activist, author of sf stories and books about sf (including a Philip K. Dick encyclopedia) and translator of J.G. Ballard, died on 30 January; he was 69.

Charles Chilton (1917–2013), UK author and radio presenter famed for his 1950s BBC Radio serial *Journey into Space* (the first three storylines of which he also novelised), died on 2 January. He was 95.

Ray Cusick (1928–2013), designer of the utterly iconic Daleks for *Doctor Who* in 1963, died on 21 February aged 84.

Jan Howard Finder (1939–2013), US fan, author, anthologist (*Alien Encounters*, 1983), Tolkienophile and convention organiser, died on 25 February; he was 73.

Stuart Freeborn (1914–2013), UK make-up artist whose most famous creations were the ape-men of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Yoda in *Star Wars*, died on 5 February aged 98. His many other genre credits include *Dr Strangelove*.

Anne Devereaux Jordan, a 1980s editor at *F&SF* who founded the US Children's Literature Association in 1973, died on 2 February; she was 69. In 1992 she received the CLA's first Anne Devereaux Jordan Award for outstanding contributions in that field.

Daniel Pearlman (1935–2013), US sf/fantasy author and former professor of creative writing who published in genre magazines and anthologies from 1988, died on 18 February aged 77. His first genre novel was the cyberpunk dystopia *Memini* (2003).

James Plumeri, cover art director for 15 years with New American Library and then 1985–2005 with Bantam Dell (where he designed the mass-market covers for *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*), died on 2 February aged 79.

Archie Roy (1924–2012), Scots astronomer, academic and paranormal researcher whose six sf/horror novels include the 'Hitler Wins' alternate history *All Evil Shed Away* (1970), died on 27 December. He was 88.

Jacques Sadoul (1934–2013), French editor, anthologist, writer and sf historian who presided for many years over the J'ai Lu sf imprint, died on 18 January aged 78. In 1972 he founded the Prix Apollo, given until 1990 for the year's best sf novel published in France.

Steve Utley (1948–2013), US author of many admired short stories including 'Custer's Last Jump' (1976) and 'Black as the Pit, from Pole to Pole' (1977) – both with Howard Waldrop – died on 12 January. He was 64.

Riccardo Valla (1942–2013), Italian science/sf writer, translator (of *The Da Vinci Code* and much sf) and chief editor at Editrice Nord in the 1970s, died on 14 January aged 70.

H.R. (Henry Richard) Van Dongen (1920–2010), prolific sf artist whose first magazine cover was for *Super Science Stories* in September 1949 and who painted covers for 46 issues of *Astounding/Analog* 1950–1985, died on 27 February 2010 aged 89, as discovered only this year in sf circles.

Sol Yurick (1925–2013), US novelist whose 1980s story 'The King of Maleputa' anticipated the virtual data-haven theme of Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* (1999), died on 5 January aged 87.

THE ANIMATOR CHRIS BUTLER



Mr Jackson's studio nestled in the northwest sector of Autumn City, in an area known for its jewellers and clothing emporiums. The streets outside buzzed with hectic activity, the clatter of cycles and rickshaws, street sellers calling, all through the daylight hours, while we laboured quietly inside.



Eleanor had called in to see me while Mr Jackson was out at lunch. "Powell," she said abruptly, "I think I'll introduce you to my uncle."

I almost spat my drink across the workbench, but managed to gulp down the hot tea.

She laughed, and her spores were almost giddily effervescent.

"Oh don't worry about it," she said. "He's got to meet you sometime."

"He does?"

She leant forward again, gazing into the phenakistoscope, which was mounted on a spinning plate on the bench. I pushed alternately on the pedals under the workbench to keep the plate turning.

"It really is a marvel," she said again. "You're so clever, Powell."

In reality the machine was very simple. And clever or not, I was merely an apprentice at Mr Jackson's studio. Nevertheless, I *had* taken great care with the photographs of Mr and Mrs Stevenson. Looking through the slats into the spinning barrel, their images appeared to come alive so that the couple danced around and around.

"I'll arrange everything," Eleanor said. I looked at her blankly for a moment. With an exasperated burst of spores she said, "With my uncle, the Duke!"

She was serious; she planned to introduce me to the Autumn Duke. "Are you sure it's not, well, a bit premature?" I was probably mumbling, I realised. As an afterthought I added the word "Darling" in an all-too-transparent attempt to stay in her good books. Assuming I was in them in the first place.

"You have prospects," she said, referring either to our relationship or my career, I wasn't sure which.

She made her way around the bench, leant over and kissed me on the cheek, whispering in my ear, "See you later."

My fellow apprentice, Ivy, gave me a withering look as Eleanor flounced out of the door.

"It'll end in tears," she said, "mark my words."

She tucked her hair behind her ear and looked wistfully in the direction of the door.

Before I could comment, Mr Jackson came back from lunch. He removed his coat and hung it on the stand. Our main business was clocks,

making and repairs, but phenakistoscopes were a profitable sideline. He cast an appraising eye over my work.

"Set it spinning," he said, waving his finger in a circular motion. "Let's have a look."

I pushed on the pedals again, sending the plate turning.

He peered in at the animation, then gave me a big smile. "It's good work, Powell," he said. "You better get it delivered to the Stevensons."

"Yes, sir."

Ivy helped me to box it up. "It really is a beauty," she said. She smiled, relaxed and happy. Her eyes were bright blue.

I nodded. "I hope they like it."

"Of course they will," she said. "How could they not?"

.....
After work I headed through the town square on my way to meet Eleanor, but my route was blocked by a crowd. Above the crowd, I could see men being brought up onto the platform for public hanging.

"Bear witness!" the Autumn Guard called out.

I would have preferred to pass by, but the Duke's men were stationed throughout the crowd, and they pulled me in. Their spores were strong and dominating. I found myself wanting to see the men dead for their crimes, even before I knew what they were.

"These men are guilty of conspiracy," the clerk called out from the platform. "They consorted to spread lies about the Autumn Duke. By this action they have made themselves unclean. Their punishment shall be swift and without mercy."

The ropes were tightened around their necks, and the traps went from under them. At that moment I knew it was good and proper. It was only later, after I walked away from that place, that I felt bad about it.

.....
I met Eleanor at the Café Soleil. It was a favourite spot of mine after work, on the corner just round from my lodgings, with good sunlight in the early evening through the wide glass windows. Two teas there, then I snuck her back to my room.

"Albert, my landlord, he knows I bring someone back," I said. I rolled up a towel and jammed

it against the bottom edge of the door to stop our spores drifting under and out into the hall. "I don't think he minds, though."

"I bet he doesn't. The smell of us probably puts his wife in the mood."

"That's so rude!"

I didn't have much stuff, and I liked to keep the place tidy. Maybe that was the clockmaker in me. Precision in all things. Eleanor wandered over to the edge of the window and peeked down into the street. Carefully she pulled the pins from her hair and set them aside. Her hair fell straight and long, and dark as molasses.

"Some people say that's the whole point of spores," she said. "It's reproductive."

I didn't think so, even though spores were a part of what made someone attractive to you, or not, and gave you a strong sense of whether that attraction was mutual. "But that's like saying the whole point of your eyes is reproductive. If you see something you like..."

She laughed. "Maybe that's true too."

I wasn't sure what the point of this conversation was, but she was reluctant to let it drop.

"It's the biggest turn on there is, though," she said, "when you know for sure that someone wants you. Don't you think?"

She had slipped off her skirt and unbuttoned her blouse. I certainly wanted her and there was absolutely no doubt about it.

We spent a delirious hour in bed together, taking precautions not to get her pregnant, because actual reproduction has very little to do with spores. Although, lying there in the cloudy haze of our lust could easily inspire recklessness, so maybe I was wrong.

It occurred to me that the only reason we were together was because she knew I wanted her. My mind clouded with doubt. Was that enough in the long run? These thoughts were careless and too easily noticed. Eleanor climbed from the bed and began to get dressed.

I didn't want to end the night with an argument, and thankfully nor did she. She couldn't stay the night and it was getting dark out, so I had to let her go. She seemed strangely smug about something as she left. I could taste it from her but she wouldn't explain.

I pulled on my jacket, straightened my tie, and headed down the stairs, trying to be careful not to draw the attention of the landlord, whose spores were present only faintly in the front hall. As usual I spared no more than a glance at the morning's letters arranged neatly on the table by the front door. And drew to an abrupt halt. There was a letter with my name on it. I picked it up, cautiously, turned it over. And saw the state seal stamped in red wax.

The landlord bellowed my name down the hall. "Powell!"

Blast.

"Albert, I have a letter," I said, and waved it in the air like a waiter casting a napkin back and forth. "I wasn't expecting a letter."

"I'm thrilled for you," Albert said, his tone and the impact of his spores heavy with sarcasm.

"You're worrying about the rent again, aren't you? Worry not, you'll have it, I assure you."

The burly landlord huffed. "I wouldn't need to worry, if you had the slightest confidence in your own words."

I sighed. My own spores always betrayed me. "Well, in any case, I must go to my work."

Albert folded his arms across his chest, but then another tenant came down the stairs and started complaining about a dripping tap in his room. I took advantage of the distraction, tucked the envelope into my pocket, and headed down the hall to the rear exit.

In the back yard my cycle was stored under a rickety shelter. I pulled it free and set off down the street at pace, heading towards work.

The sun was lifting above the level of the tenements, sending glittering shards of light over the rooftops to fall into the street like arrows. Autumn City came awake in the glare of the new day.

A state seal meant only one thing: a summons from the Duke, or someone close to him. Now I knew why Eleanor had been so smug the night before. Good as her word, she had arranged a meeting. I felt butterflies in my stomach. This was all wrong. She had no idea what she was doing. And nor did I.

.....
Autumn City is crowded and sprawling in the northern region, tapering down to a sparsely

populated area in the south. The Autumn Duke was not a town person. He had a palace in the countryside, set in acres of land maintained meticulously by his staff. I rode out most of the way, then hid my cycle and walked the last bit.

A footman showed me in to a room where the Duke appeared to be working with clerical staff. I could have spent hours studying the decorations around the room, but the Duke suddenly dismissed the staff and I found myself alone under his scrutiny.

He was a stocky man, but hard like steel. His hair had been shaved close to his scalp. His attire was formal, in seasonal russet colours. I could feel my heartbeat accelerating as we exchanged pleasantries. A surly dissatisfaction with me was unmistakable in his spores. He indicated a chair so I sat down, but he himself remained standing.

"My niece speaks very highly of you," he said. "She is, of course, an impressionable young girl."

"Your Grace?"

"Do you really think these phenakistoscopes will lead you to the kind of wealth that is expected?"

"I –"

"I have seen other similar designs, from other inventors. To my eye it is a child's toy. And you, just an apprentice. No, it won't do, it won't do at all. You agree, I'm sure."

The word *spore* is derived from the Greek, meaning the act of sowing. It is meant metaphorically rather than literally, for the sowing of understanding between us. But at that moment I was quite sure the Duke and I did not understand each other at all. In his presence I could not argue with him, the power of his spores so overwhelming. I wondered how a man like him could ever engage meaningfully with anyone.

"I am sure you are correct, Your Grace," was all I could say.

"Yes, I feel sure I am. But – prove me wrong, if you like. Find other work. Improve your fortunes, if you can."

A glimmer of hope, then. Not a complete and utter dismissal. Or was I just fooling myself? Surely he had no real expectation that I would somehow reinvent myself and earn my fortune.

The truth was, I loved my work at Mr Jackson's

studio and I didn't want to leave. All I could think of to improve my standing was perhaps to invent some new kind of clock or animation device.

"You can do it," Eleanor said, when I next met her in the café. "Invent something new, make a name for yourself."

She brushed her hand across her forehead, tidying some wayward strands of her hair. I looked past her at the way the sunlight cast the design of the glass café door onto the floor.

"I've tried but I can't think of a single thing," I said. "Maybe I could ask Mr Jackson. Perhaps between us we might come up with something."

A burst of sourness from her told me she was less than impressed with this suggestion. "If Jackson had any ideas he'd have come up with them by now."

Behind the counter I could see the waitress lift the kettle off the stove. I wished she would hurry up and bring the drinks. Any distraction would be welcome at this point.

"He's made a success of his business, though," I said.

"Yes, by taking advantage of two young apprentices and paying them hardly anything. Just what does this apprenticeship of yours lead to, anyway?"

"Er, well, a permanent position, I suppose."

"With more money?"

"Undoubtedly," I said, but as ever my spores betrayed me.

"You're hopeless," she said.

When the drinks came we mostly sat with them in silence, and the spores drifting between us were clingy and sombre. Eleanor wouldn't come back to my place, and I had no idea when I might see her again. No idea at all.

"Do you know what the problem with the phenakistoscope is, Ivy?" I asked her, still maddened by my inability to invent something.

She looked up from her work. "Problem?"

"Yes, the problem."

"I wasn't aware there was one, Powell."

"There are no spores. The device doesn't generate any spores. So no matter how appealing the illusion, it just doesn't *feel* real."

I was aware of a flicker of something complex from Ivy then, as if the notion troubled her. Her

mood could cloud over in a second sometimes. "I suppose that's true," she said, brightening again, "but people do like them, even so."

"Maybe we could bottle them, the spores, and somehow release them. Later."

She burst out laughing. Apparently I had now invented hysterical laughter.

"Oh you are funny," she said, when at last she could speak again. "You might as well try to bottle the ripples in a pond after a stone has been thrown into it! I think you'd be better off sticking closer to the basic idea of the phenakistoscope. Only bigger and better, somehow."

I nodded. Perhaps she was right.

"How about a camera obscura?" I said. "I've been reading about those. They sound entertaining."

Ivy looked at me, her face blank. "A camera what?"

"You build a hut with a hole in the wall. Light comes through the hole and falls onto a screen."

"And?"

"And you can see what's happening outside. On the screen."

"You go into a hut to see what's happening outside?"

"Yes."

"Why wouldn't you just go outside?"

I laughed. "You have a point."

We laughed a lot, Ivy and me. She was good fun, most of the time.

"What do you –" I found myself changing the subject without really meaning to. "What do you hope for, in life, Ivy?"

"Gosh, Powell, I don't know. A nice place to live. Someone who treats me kind. And to be good at my work, of course."

Ivy worked with meticulous care at all times, I thought. She might have been a better choice for me than Eleanor, except for the fact that Ivy would also have preferred Eleanor, for herself.

"So you want to earn the good things in life through your own endeavours?"

"Oh yes," she said. "No one's going to just give it all to me, are they! Oh, and there's one other thing I want. I want to invent something better than whatever you invent."

I smiled. Quite right too. "Some people do have everything just given to them," I said.

"They probably don't appreciate it all, though, do they?"

"No," I said, "I don't think they do."

I sat in the Café Soleil on my own after work. I found myself gazing at the way the light shone through the door of the café, casting the coloured design onto the floor. Maybe somehow that projection could be harnessed to greater effect.

The beginning of an idea was coming to me. The Café Soleil must have the best light in all of Autumn City. But come to think of it, the place hadn't been very busy at all, for a while now.

"How's business?" I said to the old guy who brought me my drink.

"Slow." He shook his head sadly. "Very slow."

"Who owns this place?"

"I do," he said. "I just had to let my best waitress go." He held out his hand. "Name's Bigbury," he told me.

I shook his hand. "Powell."

"I see you in here a lot," he said. "Wish we had more like you."

My idea was crystallising quickly in my mind. I mulled a few last details before speaking. "What would you say, Mr Bigbury, if I said I could double your business?"

"I'd say, 'Who do I have to kill?'"

"Ha ha. Good one. Your takings have been steady the last few weeks?" He nodded. "Let's say I double it, I get thirty per cent of the extra. Deal?"

"Thirty per cent of half?"

"Thirty per cent of the extra. Maybe I'll do better than double your income."

"All right, it's a deal. What do you need, kid?"

I pointed in the direction of the window. "I just need permission to do whatever I want with your window."

Mr Jackson was a decent man, and he said I could use the workshop in the evenings as long as it was all in my own time and I paid for any materials I used.

The clockwork mechanism was quite straightforward, though I wanted it to be sturdy enough to drive a selection of plates around. I figured it wasn't much use to have the image projected onto the floor, but there was a lot of white wall

space in the Café Soleil. A careful arrangement of mirrors and lenses would lift the image up to fill that space.

"Understand, sir," I told Mr Bigbury, "this is just the first prototype. I'll build something more elaborate. I just wanted to get us up and running. See what response we get."

"Right you are, Powell."

The prototype cast simple abstract colour designs across the walls of the Café Soleil. A modest start but it seemed to impress the few customers who were in when I set it up. I showed Mr Bigbury how to wind the mechanism, which at regular intervals moved a new image in front of the lens.

We'd see how that went, and in the meantime I'd develop some more elaborate animations. I had in mind a kind of picture book, using coloured images or silhouettes to tell a story.

I carried out my normal work for Mr Jackson during the day, and worked on my own project in the evenings. For some reason I couldn't quite decipher, Ivy was being rather cold and distant with me. It was something to do with the mechanism I was developing, but I thought it unlikely this was any kind of professional jealousy. She refused to discuss it.

I could prepare the plates in Mr Jackson's workshop, and fit them to a duplicate mechanism, but we didn't have the Café Soleil's light. So I had only a sense of how well my first shadow mechanism would work once installed. Nevertheless as I sat in the workshop and watched the plates shifting around as the cogs turned, I had high hopes for it. The plates were intended to illustrate the story of Sholla, the warrior woman who single-handedly defended her King against an invading army. Silhouettes of enemy warriors with swords or bows, on foot or on horseback, rose and fell. Each came forward and was struck down by Sholla, while the sun and the moon and the stars rotated around and around.

When I went back to the Café Soleil, a week after first installing the prototype mechanism, there had already been an increase in trade. Mr Bigbury shook my hand and said he was delighted. "It's working, Powell, it's working!" he told me enthusiastically. The spores in the room

communicated a palpable sense of happiness and excitement.

I unfastened the device from its mountings against the window and took it down. There was a murmur of disapproval from the café patrons as I did so. It appeared people really were coming here to experience the display. I set about removing the older colour plates quickly, and fitted the new ones. I wound the mechanism, feeling a little nervous. Perhaps I should have tested it while the café was closed, but I could not do so in the dark, and the Café Soleil had always opened from daybreak till dusk.

I managed to find one unoccupied chair and sat down to watch. The scenes were projected onto the café walls exactly as I hoped. Whether or not the display proved popular remained to be seen, but I rejoiced in having achieved what I set out to. I was so captivated by my work that I forgot to take notice of how the other patrons were receiving it. When I did think at last to consider them, I saw they had become perfectly still and seemed entranced.

The display reached its end, the silhouette plates withdrawn into the mechanism's housing for a minute or two till it would start over. A quiet hush had descended on the café – the spores in the room were unlike anything I had experienced before.

"Wonderful," someone said, breaking the silence.

Others said the same. They came to me and shook my hand; congratulated me. Asked me questions about how it was done. Had I made the machine or only installed it? How marvelous it was!

I went home that night feeling elated, completely unable to sleep, planning what to do next.

"I've been thinking about what you said." I'd thought Ivy was engrossed in her work, but obviously not. "About images not seeming real because of the absence of spores."

She had my interest. "Yes?"

"Suppose you put a group of people together in a room and show them an image that makes them laugh."

"Yes?"

"Well, they're going to supply the spores, aren't

they? Because they're amused. Once they get started they will supply the missing spores themselves. It'll be self-fulfilling."

Was she right? "I'm not sure," I said.

She cast a glance around to make sure we were alone. In a hushed voice she said, "What you're doing at the café, you realise it's –"

"What?"

"It's *theatre*, Powell."

I blinked. "No it isn't," I said, "it's just a light show."

Ivy looked very thoughtful. "Made from sunlight, yes. But in essence it's theatre."

"But..." I floundered, uncomfortable. "This isn't people gathering in secret in dark rooms. It's nothing like it."

I remembered clearly when I'd first heard of the idea of theatre. I was just a child. One of the carers in the orphanage had whispered to me about it. There had been a brief attempt to legitimise the theatre, with performances held openly. This woman, she made it sound exciting but, soon after, she changed and never spoke of it again.

No one spoke of it except in hushed whispers. It was a perverse activity in which people allowed their mood to be manipulated, till they wallowed in a haze of their own sordid spores. "It's not the kind of thing that goes on in Autumn City," I said.

"Are you sure about that?" Ivy asked pointedly.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Was she implying she knew it *did* go on? She looked lost, her spores vague and cold, like she was clouded in a fog of sad weariness.

"Maybe you're right and what you're doing is something different," she said at last. "But I think your café idea is going to work brilliantly, and I think the reason why it will work is that the people in there are going to feed off each others' spores."

I didn't know what to say.

She shook her head, then went back to focusing on her work. She didn't look at me for a long time after that.

.....
The next time I saw Eleanor she arrived with a minder at her side. He said he would leave us alone while we took a walk through the park,

but in fact he followed discretely some distance behind us; I couldn't help glancing back at him from time to time. His presence was unusual and unnerved me.

"Is something wrong?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. She leant down and picked a flower and held it to her nose. "Things are impossible lately. I just want to be my own person, to be with the people I like. Is that so wrong?"

"People?"

"Artists, craftsmen, talented people."

I smiled. "Is there none of that in your –"

"No," she said, cutting me off. "In my world they all believe so fervently in our traditions that you have no choice but to fall in line with them. I feel completely stifled, for days on end. But then when I escape for a while, to sit with a painter at work, or a sculptor, or a poet, then I feel... something more."

"Was that what you saw in me, the night we met?"

She laughed gently. "You were very drunk!"

That was true. I had gone out drinking with my friend Patrice, who was originally from Winter City and had decided to go back there to try to find work. We drank far too much and then went to eat. Patrice managed somehow to persuade Eleanor and her friend Catherine to join their restaurant table with ours. Neither of them knew us before that night, but we talked easily with each other. By the end of it I knew I had to see Eleanor again. I sometimes wonder if Patrice and Catherine might have... But anyway, the next day he left as planned.

"It might be more difficult to see you for a while," Eleanor said. She cast aside the flower she'd been holding.

"What? Why do you say that?"

She seemed so unhappy suddenly. I reached out and took her hand, half-expecting she would snatch it away. But she held mine tightly and leant against me as we walked.

"No one explains anything to me," she said. "I'll just have to hope these restrictions won't last. Be patient, Powell."

"Of course," I said, "but you'll see me when you can, won't you?"

She nodded, and held my hand more tightly.

After that the conversation turned to the latest gossip from her circle of friends, and she seemed happier.

I spent a lot of time in the City Library, looking for new ideas for my mechanism. What stories or illuminations might it show? In the southern reaches of Winter City there were feral cats clothed in fur the colour of snow. It might be amusing to imagine them as fierce tribes warring with each other.

Frequently I found myself pondering what kind of entertainment I was seeking to provide. I just wanted to tell stories, like those in books. What was wrong with that? At what point did this cross over into something forbidden?

Eventually I put aside the books I had been studying and instead directed my attention to some older newspapers. These were all filed meticulously, and surely if I hit upon the right date I would find journalistic coverage of the theatre performances I recalled from my childhood. I remembered it was in the Riverside area, perhaps ten years earlier?

I soon found a paper containing an advertisement for the opening of a theatre. That led me to the week of the opening itself and a report on the event. Fascinated, I read that the first night had been hailed as a compelling new experience. But weeks later an entirely different story was being told: lack of interest, financial losses. Eventually, just a small notice that the theatre had closed.

I made a note of the significant names: the owner of the theatre, the play's leading performers, the name of the newspaper reporter. I left the library and set off in the direction of the Riverside district where the theatre had stood. Was it even there now, I wondered?

The sun shone brightly, as if determined to project this story before me. But I couldn't see it clearly. Not yet.

It took some days of asking around and further delving into archives before I made much progress. The Autumn Theatre, as it was known, still occupied its original location in the northeast part of the city, near to the river, but it was completely derelict now. There was no sign bearing its name, no clue now as to its former purpose.

The owner denied any knowledge of the building's use as a theatre, saying only that he had acquired it around the time in question; he would not say from whom. This would be a matter of public record, however, so I knew I could uncover that if I wanted. Was it relevant? It was hard to imagine that detail would turn out to be important. Why had he allowed it to fall into dereliction? He had lost money in other ventures, he said, and could not afford repairs.

The performers had common names and, since no further theatre performances had ever occurred openly in Autumn City, I struggled to trace any of them.

Only the name of the reporter, James Knox, stirred some recognition when I asked around the neighbourhood bars. The man was apparently not well regarded. Often dishevelled and rumoured to be untrustworthy. Nevertheless I traced him to a small flat in a less appealing neighbourhood a little further south.

"Might I speak to you?" I asked the man who answered the door. He had not shaved, had untidy hair, and his ragged clothing hung loosely on his thin frame.

"Who are you?"

"I am an apprentice clockmaker," I said. This seemed a wholly inappropriate answer given my recent activity, so I added, "amongst other things."

"Got no use for clocks," he said, and began to push the door closed again.

"I'm also interested in theatre," I said, the words tumbling out as quickly as I could manage.

This stopped him completely for a moment, but then he recovered and pulled the door open. The stench of his spores was not pleasant, and I suppose the reaction in me must have been apparent to him.

"Yeah, I'm not much these days, am I?" he said.

I became acutely aware of the power dynamic between us. I was in a position of relative strength, which was new to me. In theory he should defer to me in most matters, within reason.

"Let me in," I said. "I'd like to talk to you about what happened with the Autumn Theatre."

He wavered for just a moment, then nodded and let me follow him back into the flat.

He slumped down into a sofa, scattering a cloud of dust as he did so. There was a chair opposite so I took that, reluctantly because of the general state of filth.

"I guess what I really want to know is why people didn't like it, why it failed."

He snorted, like I had just said something incredibly stupid.

"Didn't like it," he mumbled. "Kid, people loved that show."

"They did?"

He nodded and smiled, like just the memory of it felt good to him.

"Then why did it close? What went wrong?"

He paused a moment, then said, "Think carefully about why you're asking me this. Look at what's happened to me. Maybe this is what's waiting for you, if you go down a certain path."

"I don't understand."

"All I'm saying is, maybe it would be better for you if you walked out of here right now and didn't look back."

I thought about what he was saying, trying to imagine what dire consequences might befall me. I felt sure that I would be better off knowing the nature of his concerns rather than not knowing.

"If you'd just tell me what happened," I said.

"All right then. You know what a theatre's like, right? Big audience of people all looking at the same thing, following what's happening on the stage. You ever experience anything like that?"

I thought back to what had happened in the Café Soleil. The show I had created there, and the appreciation I'd received. "Yes, Mr Knox. In a small way."

"Suppose in the play something amusing happens, or something sad perhaps. What happens to the audience do you think?"

"Well, they would react to it."

"In the same way, or each in different ways?"

"In the same way, I suppose."

"Now, let's for a moment look instead at this situation here, with you and me. You're a respectable, intelligent young man, making your way in the world, I'm sure. Full of optimism, you are. You stink of it. Whereas I've gone down in the world, lost my standing, lost confidence in myself. That being the case you can dominate

this situation, this dynamic between us, as in fact you have already demonstrated from the moment you got here."

"I didn't mean –"

He waved away my objection.

"It doesn't matter. But imagine there were ten people like me sat here, all ten feeling the same identical things as me, but still only one of you. Imagine a hundred of me, and one of you. Imagine a theatre full of me, and one of you. Well, do you see that the dynamic would be a little different?"

I did see. I saw it clearly.

"Maybe I wouldn't care about you," he said, "maybe I wouldn't even notice you. Maybe the power you have over me would just melt away."

"In which case –"

"You're starting to get it, aren't you? Now, suppose a powerful man, like, say, the Autumn Duke, were to attend the theatre production one night. How do you think he would feel? The man who normally dictates and controls everything? Rendered powerless in comparison with the strength of everyone else combined? Powerless before the strength of the message conveyed by the play."

"Was the message of the play controversial?"

"Not in our case, no, not at all. But the point is, it could have been. The point is, we were one step away from a mechanism for revolution."

"And the Duke understood this?"

"I believe he did. In any case pressures were brought to bear on everyone involved. The theatre soon closed, and very few people ever spoke of it again. Most everyone involved drifted away, supposedly moved to other cities. I don't know if that's really what happened to them. They're gone from Autumn City anyway."

"But surely," I struggled to grasp all the implications, "it's not unheard of for crowds of people to gather together?"

"It's rarer than you think. And when it does happen, who do the people gather to listen to?"

"The Duke," I said.

"Yes – or his officials. And who does he place throughout the crowd?"

I thought back to the public hangings I had seen not long before. People were gathered in the square. The Autumn Guard had been placed

strategically among the crowd. They were all strong men and fiercely loyal to the Duke. They set the tone for such gatherings, always.

He smiled. "You might think the Duke is always going to parties, always surrounded by many people. In a modestly sized room with not too many people, he can still dominate. He is, after all, one of the most powerful men in the city, a popular man. So long as the people admire him, he has nothing to fear."

"Every public appearance is carefully managed?"

"The mores of our society have been meticulously orchestrated for generations. The room is never too big, the crowd too large, unless the situation is controlled."

I sat in silence for a while, considering what he had said.

He was the one to break that silence. "I'm wondering what you've got yourself into, kid."

I stood up and headed for the door. "Thank you for your time, Mr Knox."

As I was leaving he said, "Whatever it is, if I were you I would put a stop to it, before they notice you." He grabbed my arm. "And one other thing. Whatever you do, don't mention *my* name."

I stared at him, then pulled my arm free. "One other question," I said. "I've heard rumours of secret theatres, secret performances." In truth I had heard only the slightest hint of this, from Ivy. "Know anything about that?"

He shook his head, so I turned and walked away.

He called after me. "Promise me you won't mention my name."

I walked along the river for a while, going over what Knox had said, then decided to head back to the Café Soleil. The place was full when I went in, and there was an intoxicating taste of joy in the spores in the air. Mr Bigbury spotted me, came over and shook my hand warmly.

"It's incredible," he said, "I've had people queuing to come in."

The Sholla silhouette play was running. I could see Bigbury had already employed new serving staff to cope with the upturn in his fortunes. I glanced around the café. Over by the window

there were two men who looked out of place. They were dressed sombrely and seemed to be more interested in us than in the play. I couldn't sense their spores, beneath the strength of the others in the café. One of them had a notebook and wrote something down in it. As he began to look up in my direction I turned away.

"Mr Bigbury, can I speak to you in private?"

"Very busy here," he said, waving me away.

I wanted to insist but what would I say to him now? Did I really expect him to let me just pack up the mechanism and take it away? Was that even what I wanted?

It was getting late and I needed to think. I left the café and headed for my lodgings.

I lay on my bed, my mind a whirl. Would my little silhouette display in a small café really cause concern amongst the city's rich and powerful?

Then there was a knock on the door, and the fact that I almost jumped out of my skin told me how on edge I'd become. To my surprise, the person standing there when I opened the door was Eleanor. She looked almost as nervous as I felt.

"Powell," she said. She threw her arms around me and kissed me.

Her spores insinuated themselves into me, dark and heavy like anchor weights dragging me down into darkness and uncertainty. She was on the verge of tears, and all I could think of then was that I wanted to make things right with her. She kissed me again, so fiercely I couldn't help but respond. She pulled me over to the bed and brought me down with her. She pulled her skirt up and grappled with my belt. The sex was desperate and brief, and she left the bed almost immediately afterwards.

"I can't stay," she said simply, "and I can't see you again."

"What?"

"You're being watched. I've taken a risk by being here."

"You can't just, do what we just did, then leave."

"I have to. If you care anything for me, don't try to speak to me again. Go back to clocks and phenakistoscopes, Powell. Do it now, while maybe you still can."

She came close, kissed me again, then left before I could argue any more.

I **hardly** slept that night. In the morning I forced myself to get dressed and head out to work. I moved down the stairs. In the front hall I looked for the morning's letters on the table by the door. There was a letter with my name on it. I picked it up, cautiously, turned it over. And saw the state seal stamped in red wax.

I opened the letter at once. I had been summoned to meet with the Duke again, that afternoon. A carriage would be sent for me this time.

At work I explained to Mr Jackson that I would have to go out in the afternoon, and showed him the letter. I struggled through the morning, unable to focus on my work.

"Whatever is the matter with you?" Ivy asked me.

"It's nothing," I said.

She frowned at me, knowing I had lied but not knowing why.

The carriage arrived at the appointed hour. I was ushered into the room and left alone with the Duke.

"Take a seat, Powell," he said.

I sat down.

He paused, then took a quick breath. When he spoke, it was a grave sound at the lower end of his register. "Last year, over in Summer City, the Summer Duke was replaced. Did you hear of that?"

"It was reported," I said, "in the newspapers, Your Grace."

"Yes. The Summer Duke developed a kind of illness. He no longer commanded the respect of others. It emerged that while in office he had committed certain acts that were illegal, and he was brought to justice for his crimes. It was all quite shocking."

I tried to remain calm. I thought it best not to comment unless comment was requested.

"Those of us in positions of power, we have a certain responsibility to maintain order. Don't you agree? Events cannot be allowed to fall out of control. That would embarrass us all."

"I agree," I said, automatically without any conscious thought. I could not do otherwise in the presence of a man whose spores were so dominant.

"I feel in a way that I am responsible for the situation you find yourself in. I encouraged you

to take action. But to improve your prospects, not to cast them to the wind. Unfortunately you have chosen a very unwise path." He picked up a piece of paper that was on his desk, then placed it back again. "This café owner, Mr Bigbury, is in a very precarious position, though I daresay he is unaware of it."

"I would like to assure you –"

The Duke held up a hand to silence me, and fixed me with an icy stare. "Should things return to normal quickly, there will be no need for any action against *him*."

"His business had declined of late, Your Grace," I said. I don't know what I hoped to achieve by this.

"Should things not return to normal he shall have no business at all. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"I am being lenient with you, Powell," he said. "As a kindness to my niece, I am taking the view that your actions were unthinking and careless, and that you did not intend this..." He hesitated, then said, "*Perversion*."

The force of his contempt struck me like a fist.

"I could easily take a different view," he said. "You can leave now. I hope for your sake I have no cause to speak to you again. Live a *quiet* life, Powell."

A footman escorted me from the building. A carriage took me to the Café Soleil, rather than to Mr Jackson's studio. It seemed I was to waste no time in removing my mechanism.

Mr Bigbury had seen the carriage drop me off outside.

"Was that a state carriage?"

"It was," I told him. "There is something I have to discuss with you."

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

"You need to make time for this," I said. "I'm taking the mechanism."

His expression changed from impatience to confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Please, can we go somewhere and talk?"

He relented, gave some instructions to his staff and went with me to an upstairs room. I followed him up the stairs with a heavy heart, readying myself for another difficult discussion. With Knox I had been in charge. With the

Autumn Duke I had been powerless. What was my relationship with Mr Bigbury? I realised I had not given this any thought till now.

Before we'd even sat down in the small sitting room he said, "You can't have it."

"It seems I've infringed someone else's copyright," I said. "The machine is illegal. I've been ordered to dismantle it."

"Who has the copyright, then? I will deal with them instead of you."

My heart fell, caught out immediately in a deception conceived in too much haste and told with too little conviction. He caught the crestfallen stench in my spores and his eyes narrowed.

"You're lying."

I nodded, admitted it, and told him the truth at length. Slowly he came to accept that the machine would have to come down. In the course of this he seemed to age before my eyes, the spark of new life I had ignited in him cruelly snuffed out.

We sat in silence for a while, not knowing what more to say. At last he looked at me and shook his head sadly.

"We'll take the machine down after I close up for the day. If we try to do it with customers in we'll have a riot on our hands."

I nodded.

"I'll take no money from you," I said. "Perhaps what you've made will tide you over for a while."

"That's not necessary," he said, "we made a deal."

But I insisted.

"If only we were warriors like Sholla," he said.

"She defended her King," I said, "but I wonder if perhaps she had no more choice than us."

I tried to go back to my former life. Weeks passed. I assembled clock mechanisms, and always in my head I imagined they would drive a play of light and shadow through mirrors and lenses. I took photographs and installed them within phenakistoscopes. How joyously the images danced before my eyes as I gazed through the slats as the drum turned.

Sometimes I would look up from my work and catch Ivy watching me. She would sigh and shake her head, and swear that she did not know what to do with me. I felt some kind of mistrust

from her, or disappointment, which I could not understand.

I went back to the Café Soleil from time to time, and was relieved to see the business had not gone completely back to its former state of ruin. For now at least, many customers were continuing to visit there. I came to recognise a certain look in the eye of the people there, the scent of nostalgia lingering in their spores. They had found something wonderful for a time, and they would remember it always.

I thought often of Sholla, the warrior woman who defended her King. How I wished that she could have been free to follow her own destiny, to live a life of her own choosing.

One day I saw Eleanor again. She was on the opposite side of a busy square, almost masked by street stalls, but we saw each other and she came over to speak to me.

"Powell," she said, "it's been a while."

"How are you?"

She sighed and glanced behind her. People were bustling around us and our voices could barely be heard with the rattle of barrows and cycles moving past. "I don't have the same freedom I once did," she said.

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Can you change the world for me?"

At the time, I didn't know how to answer. She smiled sadly, then said goodbye and vanished back into the crowd.

It struck me then that the danger had not passed. If I stayed in Autumn City I would always be watched, for years to come. I would have to live my life within the narrowest of margins or suffer the consequences.

That would be no way to live.

"I have to leave," I said.

Ivy and I were alone in the workshop. I had already spoken to Mr Jackson.

She said, "I think that will be for the best."

There was suddenly a striking openness in the taste of her spores, like a flower opening up in the morning sun. I was quite taken aback by it, hadn't realised until that moment how very closed off she had been with me.

"This episode," she said, "has put many people in danger. Those of us who love theatre so very

much.”

“Ivy?”

“Oh Powell, you really have been crashing around. Your research in the library was noticed, of course. Then asking questions down in the old Riverside district. Fortunately you never did track down anyone really important. If you had, I don’t know what we would have done with you.”

“Done with me?”

She reached out a hand across the workbench and placed it tenderly on mine. “I wish I could take you to a performance, let you see for yourself, but the risk is too great now. I could never be sure that we wouldn’t be followed.”

I should have been shocked, but somehow I was not surprised by any of this, not at all. Spores may tell you that someone is being evasive, but they do not always tell you why. Now I knew.

“The best I can say to you, Powell, is that you were almost there, with what you did at the Café Soleil. If you really want to know what it is, what’s so very special about theatre, you have the means to discover it for yourself.”

I smiled, and she did too.

She rose to her feet, withdrawing her hand from mine. “But,” she said, “you will be very wise to discover it somewhere far away from here.”

She pressed her hat into place, paused for a moment by the entrance. It was late and it looked dark outside.

When she had gone I sat alone for a while in the quiet stillness of the workshop, then locked up for the last time, posting my keys through the letterbox as I left.

The difficult part was figuring out how to travel lightly with the gear we needed. A quadricycle with a storage compartment at the back met our needs perfectly. It meant we had to follow well-worn routes, but that suited us. After all, we needed to come into contact with people.

We’d spend the morning setting up the tent, and putting up signs advertising our show. If we chose our spot well we could easily get a dozen customers, several times over each afternoon, enough to fill our small tent. We sold drinks too, at a little profit per bottle. We got by.

Knox really took to this kind of life. It came naturally and easily to him. He was hardly rec-

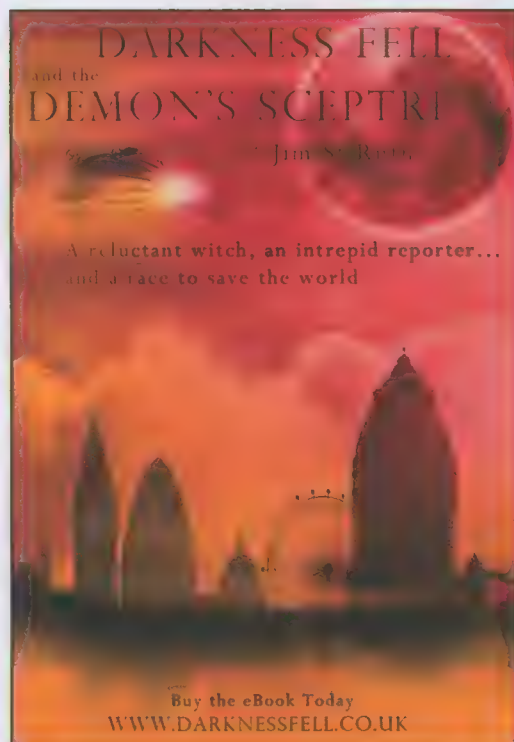
ognisable as the dishevelled, beaten down man I first met in a hovel in Autumn City.

“Roll up,” he called out. “See something you’ve never seen before!”

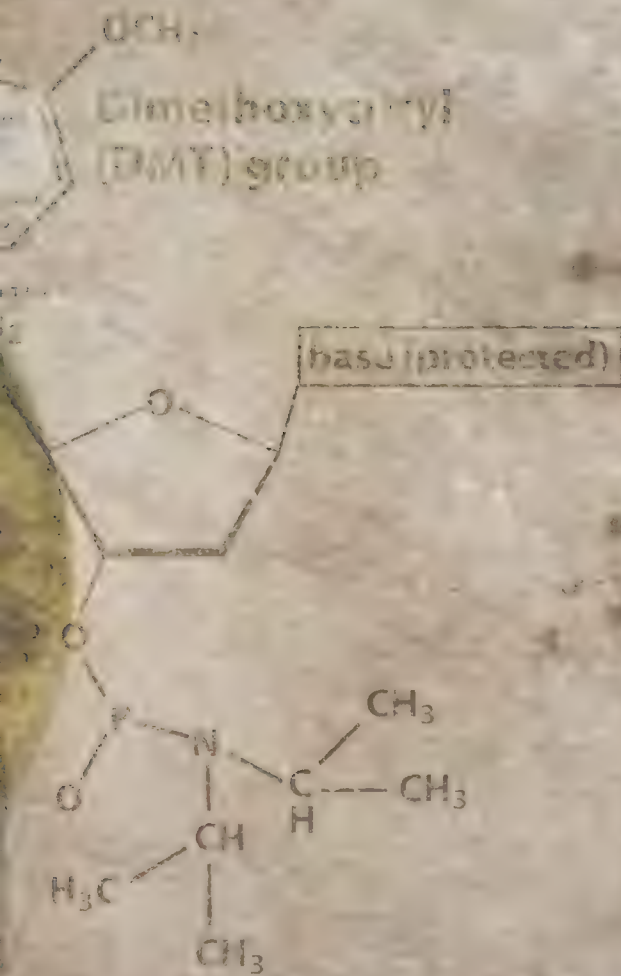
I wound up the mechanism and let it go, casting light and shadow inside the tent. Over time we created new plates for the mechanism, some of them a little more political than others. Someday, perhaps, things could change. But for now we concentrated on putting on a good show. We got a real sense of satisfaction from that, and we always had happy customers.

We travelled far from Autumn City. A small show like this could go unnoticed, we hoped, so long as we kept moving and never stayed in one place too long. It’s a very small kind of revolution, I know, but maybe that is the only way it can be done. Knox and Powell took each day as it came, and served no Duke or King.

Chris Butler’s fantasy novella ‘The Flight of the Ravens’ (immersion Press hardback) is shortlisted for the BSFA Award. ‘The Animator’ is set in the same world as his story ‘Tell Me Everything’ in *Interzone* #233. For more info, visit Chris at www.chris-butler.co.uk.







hypermnemonic by melanie tem

“I remember every single thing about you,” I said to your father as planned.

“Is that so?” His voice still smelled gamey, like venison roasted rare.

Deer meat. Of course you wouldn’t know that smell. Wild, dark, bloody. Barely done being part of one life force before being appropriated for another one.

Mickey’s gamey voice. Mickey’s little-boy fears. Mickey’s rough hands, small for a man his size, surprising me every time.

You probably don’t want to know what I remember about your father’s hands on me, right? Even with everything else you’ve had to come to terms with about him, images of him with me long before you were born make you shudder?

Think of it as context. Part of the web of one thing leading to another that’s brought us to where we are now, all of us trying to do more with our days and nights than just wait for what somebody or other will do.

So: His youthful lustiness. Mine. The homey glow of a green-shaded table lamp. Smells of bug spray and incense. Acidic strings and salty percussion. Another noise, pinwheeling. In Mickey’s presence after half a century, meeting you for the first time, I couldn’t remember what the multi-faceted noise had been. That particular node wasn’t activated yet in my memory’s elephantine associative network that was madly lighting up like a sim, Firefight or Sunspots or Neuron Storm or Meteor Shower, something with countless explosions large and small as far as the mental horizon and beyond.

The process of finding, selecting, and reconstructing that target memory was taking longer and causing me more discomfort than I was used to by that point in my – what? Career? Sentence? That should have been a clue, but at the time I just wondered in passing what I was trying to remember or trying not to. Rustling. The taste of violence.

Too much awareness of the memory-retrieval process interferes with it, the way observation alters subatomic motion or anthropological scrutiny changes the studied culture. So I pulled my attention away. You watched me do that, didn’t you? I’d hardly even noticed you yet.

If I just let it happen, all the augmentations in

what is referred to as my superior intelligence (never mind that I sometimes have trouble making it through a day) would spread the activation far beyond the normal range until the target popped up into my working memory, where it would stay abnormally long. In the meantime, I had a job to do.

Saying I remembered everything about Mickey was strategic hyperbole, which is jargon for “exaggeration,” which is a euphemism for “lie.” It couldn’t have been true, for several technical reasons and because, even in this day and age, nothing in this world is 100%.

And even I can have memories very clear and specific that are inaccurate. We hypermnesiacs are as expert at the creative, reconstructive – which is to say, false – components of memory as at selection and retrieval, though that’s not officially acknowledged even after what happened with you and me and Mickey.

That afternoon Mickey was on high alert, for all his camaraderie and good cheer. I realize now that you were, too. I’d anticipated it from him, remembering him as jumpy, watchful no matter what we were doing, eyes always moving, attention everywhere. This habit might have been useful in a childhood you probably know more about than I do and in his long fiery career in the holo wars about which I’ve learned some things in prep for this job.

Have you watched any of his bouts? That last one? Brutal. Beautiful.

So I assumed he was aware of my tension, which made me more tense. I was never really suited for that kind of work, even after all the enhancements and disenancements I’d paid for the whole first year with that adenovirus-induced monster cold. But they’d made me an offer I’d thought I couldn’t refuse, and even if I could have gotten out, I saw no better choice, either about making an approved living in general or about dealing with that particular assignment – your father.

It was reassuring that at least I hadn’t ever known him very well or spent much time with him, and our intimacy had never been all that intimate, so the volume of memories might be manageable. With people about whom I’ve had billions of memories instead of the maybe thou-

sands I had about Mickey, this work can land me back in the lab for weeks of what they call R&R.

It was a relief and a heartbreak that there was no one left whom I remembered that well. Now there's you. Which makes you terribly important and me terribly vulnerable. I hope you understand that.

Depending on how this went with Mickey, it would probably be only days before I either got a new assignment or was dismissed. At seventy-three I projected I had another twenty good years left, but that might not matter. And if I was dismissed, then what? I couldn't imagine.

I couldn't imagine you. The family I've never had.

No, that's not the reason. Any children I might have had, by whatever biological means, wouldn't have inherited my state-of-the-art memory. My egg and sperm donors got together long before germ-line was scientifically or ethically possible. Anyway, I'd have been a lousy parent. It's a bullet dodged, among all the direct hits. I do now sometimes wish I had an adult child, just skip over the parenting part and go directly to adults bound by family ties. At this point in my life, I could long for that if I let myself.

I know you're not. Honestly, I don't think of you as a daughter. We're friends. That's more than enough. Right?

That early-twenty-first-century replica pod where you and your father lived was disorienting, with its separate square-cornered rooms and simulated incandescent and fluorescent lighting. Forgive me, but its retro-chic look struck me as a bit tacky, though it must have cost a pretty penny, as we used to say when pennies were still legal currency though nobody used them much anymore. For a while there were unstable mounds of them underfoot in holo parks, on transport rails, looking and smelling coppery and clinking dully when they scattered. Then they disappeared altogether.

Your brown dog lay open-eyed and curved to fit against the wall. Its strong brown-dog odor let me know it was either an actual living animal or a higher-quality simulacrum. At the faux-antique dining room table with us, you were quiet and crippled and seemed more lightly watchful than your father. Your leg stuck out, none of its joints

bending. I lost some time and focus wondering why it hadn't been fixed. Then I lost a few more milliseconds acutely regretting that this lapse of concentration would be in my performance eval.

Mickey was laughing. I remembered that laugh even as a new memory of it was created: burnt orange, big-bellied, deep-throated, dangerously attractive. As a romantic schoolgirl, I used to speculate that it was an expression of equal parts hostility and joviality, which I'd found exciting. Until I didn't anymore.

I glanced again at you, and a memory formed of the way light through the window gleamed on your skin. It had been a long time since I'd spent that many minutes – twenty-eight and counting – in what used to be called natural light, and my skin was crawling. A throwback instinct to catalogue made me wonder what your racial composition was, which for another ill-advised millisecond distracted me from the job at hand.

As a warm-up, and to reassure myself that I could do this, I rapidly reviewed the route I used to take between my squeaky dorm room and his squat, off-true, muttering apartment, both buildings and almost everything between them long since razed or enhanced beyond recognition. I hadn't accessed those memories since the fix of my eyesight, and the dearth of visual data was striking, as were the sporadic sight-based "memories" of things I couldn't possibly have seen – webs draping the corners of my window filled in from the sticky strand in my hair and from Mickey's refusal to come in because of the spider he'd spotted on the floor and crushed under his boot; imagined warmth for me in Mickey's eyes. The rotation of streets (right on Monroe which had been yellow, two blocks and then left on W. 10th, up the hill to hot Winston where there'd been a little stand of tall pungent pines like brush bristles, one long curving block to Baldwin, immediate sharp left on vibrating Hilltop Place). Alleys, unnamed in that part of town by then, identified by a faint pattern of brick on a garage wall, a graffitied dumpster with a permanent olfactory halo of garbage. Streetlights, the old-fashioned kind on poles. Fences of physical construction, my knuckles bouncing over chain link and scraping splintery wood. Residences, mostly what were then called condos and town-

homes, three holdover single-family houses, two of which had been scraped during my interlude with your father, screwing up my directional cues, especially returning to the dorm, so that at least once I'd gotten lost, panicked, calmed myself, found my way. A school low and long like a warehouse, twenty-four windows, strident bells artificially dividing the educational process as was the misguided custom of the day and, for no good reason other than limited technology, continuing to measure immeasurable time through the night and weekends. Four reeking bars. Cracks in the sidewalks, forty-seven short, three long and deep enough to snag a shoe. Doughnut and hardware smells. Both our phone numbers. The addresses of both buildings and of every building in between.

All this I'd repeatedly verified with old-fashioned footwork and recording. My unusual memory still amused and amazed me, as if it were a curiosity, like being double-jointed, instead of the powerful tool and enormous disability you and I and the Authorities now know it to be.

Interesting that "memory" can mean both that which is remembered and that which remembers. Both subject and object. That which acts and that which is acted upon.

All these data, impressions, sensory stimuli, factoids constantly being stored and readily accessible in my brain can seriously interfere with its other functions, such as focusing, drawing inferences, making connections, grasping the big picture, finding my socks. Good thing, I told myself, I didn't need the big picture. All I needed to do was my job, which I understood to be bringing your father in, why I wasn't entirely sure except that it had to do with his holo war career being over and there being nowhere else to put his aggression. Then, I hoped, my next job.

With no sign of noticing my split-second lapse in concentration, Mickey said, "What I remember about you is what a beautiful woman you were. Beautiful Belle. Belle Belle." He hadn't lost that insinuating, bullying flirtatiousness.

"Oh?" Archness is not my forte. "Are you saying I'm not beautiful now?"

"Since I don't know what the hell sex you are anymore, I can't say."

"Does it matter what *gender* I am?" He snorted at my correction. "Gender isn't binary, it's a spectrum, like disability, like race, like any other –"

"Spectrum my ass. I'm black. You're white. I'm a 'he,' Deanna's a 'she.' That's what's normal. That's how the world works. Period, end of story." Having settled that, he went on slyly, "I also remember the fun we had."

That prompted very specific memories of why sex with him hadn't been all that much fun for me and why I'd kept doing it anyway for those thirty-seven days and nights, about thirty-six too many. I'll spare you the details.

"And," your father added, peering at me with intensity I didn't yet understand, "I seem to remember you were going blind. But you aren't blind, are you?"

"Nope. 20/20. Nanos went in there like a bunch of teeny-tiny spiders with teeny-tiny glue guns."

"Jesus. Thanks for sharing, Belle." Big and muscular as he was, his shudder looked peculiar.

Revulsion at ophthalmic technology? Arachnophobia? Purism about the human body? My WM stored for possible further use the memories of his reaction and my various theories about it, at least one of which turned out to be correct.

"So you rejected the deformity God gave you, and you deformed yourself in a way God never intended." He sighed and shook his head. "Ah, Belle."

"The name's Bo now." In order to avoid having exactly this conversation too soon, I had used the old name when I'd contacted him about getting together. Not for the first time or the last, it had felt like self-betrayal. Being with Mickey always did make me look for ways to stand up for myself, and annoying him in the process was a bonus. You know what I mean.

"Beau?" He spelled it out. "Like the masculine form of Belle? Clever."

"Bo." I spelled it out. "It's not gender-specific. Neither am I."

"Horseshit." He got up and went into the kitchen. I was amused that it was a separate space with vintage stove, sink, and refrigerator. I bet it even had one of those garbage disposers, didn't it?

You were watching your father. I didn't catch that you were also observing me. You're good.

My lower back was aching, and I marveled that this kind of furniture design had ever been regarded as ergonomically correct, let alone comfortable. Ever since then, lumbar aches and pains are associated with memories of that encounter with Mickey and the first time I met you.

The dog had been watching Mickey, too. Now it got up and started to follow him. Your "No!" was a sharp citrus plea. Mickey's was a thrown-brick of an order. The dog hesitated, then started toward him again wagging its tail hopefully. I noted and then remembered your gasp, Mickey's glare, the click of the dog's nails on the linoleum and the sharp spike of its odor.

Mickey's voice was like a garrotte as he threatened, "You want me to get the belt?" The dog cowered.

I thought you did, too, as you whispered, "Oh, Daddy, don't." You both knew what he meant. You both remembered, and then so did I, so would I: Jovial gray-bearded bully's warm molasses voice suddenly smelling like bloody leather, shadows through the inefficient antique skylight, banjo blues from some sort of Luddite sound system.

The dog scuttled back to its corner. The tension and the dog odor receded, and I realized an odor was emanating from you, too, but not of fear. I couldn't readily identify what it was and deemed it, mistakenly, unimportant.

You relaxed a little and murmured "Good boy," I presumed to the dog. Now there's an image – you saying "good boy" to your father.

What ever happened to that dog?

Oh. I'm so sorry. My God.

Mickey brought three beers, handed one to you though you were shaking your head, offered one to me. Per protocol, I declined. The good host and dictator, he waved the can in front of my face. Instead of any direct avoidance or resistance, leaning back or turning my head or knocking the can out of his hand or pouring the beer down the sink – which probably had a drain, right? – I drew myself up and met his narrow gaze. Before the spidery nanos worked their ophthalmologic magic, I had never seen

the expression in anyone's eyes, and sometimes it's still a shock.

The standoff stopped when Mickey reached across me to set the can sharply on what I remembered was called an end table. This briefly put him close enough for me to feel his body heat and smell his cologne, not as aggressively musky as what he'd worn all those years ago.

If only for old times' sake, I found myself tempted, and not just by the beer. I noted the temptation and remembered it. My mind and body could wait for the official R&R readjustment. I didn't know anybody anymore who actually drank, smoked, injected or otherwise ineffectively altered mental and physical states. I also didn't then know anybody who wasn't altered, who still lived in the body and mind they were born with.

Mickey settled back and popped the top on his beer can. The motion set off long chains of memories I ignored as irrelevant. He took a long swig and launched into that narrative about his life since we'd had contact with each other. Much of it was in the files downloaded into my brain. Interestingly, disconcertingly, some wasn't. How much of it had you known? How much of it was true? Hold that thought. We'll go into it later.

He'd worked in a steel mill in Pittsburgh; he said it "Picksburgh," the way a lot of locals still do for the place where the three rivers used to meet. The colloquial pronunciation always did grate on my nerves, and when Mickey used it a chain of very early memories was activated that I just marked for later access.

No, it was Pittsburgh, with t's. Named for William Pitt, not William Pick. Trust me on this.

When I asked what he was doing now, Mickey told me he was a deacon in his church, preached sometimes, sang in the choir, managed a few fights, otherwise was "just a happy little homebody."

"Fights?"

"Dogs. About all the excitement I can handle anymore."

"Do you miss the holos?"

He frowned. "Nosy little thing, aren't you?"

His truculence confused and alerted me. Not wanting to push too much too soon, I back-pedaled. "Oh, you know, do you get bored now?"

Apparently this was still too personal. His anger was like another person in the room. "Why," he asked dangerously, "do you want to know?"

"Just – curious."

"Curious'll get you in trouble."

Regretting that it was too soon to keep prodding him, I marked the holo and dog-fight things for possible near-future use and just let him go on.

Almost without expression, as if completing a demographic form, he reported his four marriages, three divorces, one widowhood. The proud patriarch, he talked about you and your siblings, his grandchildren, the newborn great-granddaughter.

It didn't take much for him to segue into a bellicose story about knocking one of his sons backward over a coffee table when the teenager mouthed off to him. Though I hadn't challenged him, he defended himself. "Hey, that's how my folks did with me and I turned out okay. If my kids did their kids like that, we'd all be a helluva lot better off."

Were you there when it happened? But you've heard about it? From him, from your brother?

Memories do that, don't they – mutate, accrue, pick up stuff along the way so you can't tell what's true.

Now we're getting to the part of the story you weren't there for, after your father announced he was going to drive me around town and check out the old places.

Score, I thought.

This was going to be easy, I thought.

Don't get cocky, I thought. Pay attention.

When he said, "Then we'll come back and enjoy Deanna's dinner," I took note that you weren't going with us, that he hadn't asked either of us if that was okay, that you might be feeling left out, that you were still expected to "make" dinner instead of ordering it through the grid. I know, I needn't have felt sorry for you.

The town your father and I wandered around that afternoon bore only the slightest mnemonic resemblance to the one I remembered. It occurred to me that my coming of age in that previous town had been partly at his hands, which I thought of then as only sexual. Being

in his vintage personal automobile that he was driving, among other human-operated vehicles on asphalt streets with potholes and faded center lines and traffic lights, sent my LTM into a frenzy pulling up decades-old memories embellished and layered like coral. WM bulged with new memories being created on the spot – jazz like black and purple balloons from an antiquated CD player in the dashboard, a slippery blue breeze through the four open windows he controlled and had rolled all the way down without asking my preference.

A multi-story pod complex stood where the pizza shop used to be. Have you ever had a slice of pizza? Deanna, my dear, you don't know what you're missing. Maybe there's a reasonable sim. I'll look.

The few common memories Mickey and I had of the place were enough to produce a comradely nostalgia, useful and dangerous. The footprint of the current structure looked to be about the same as Pizza World's had been, but the vertical mass dwarfed the sky.

The only vestige of the college campus was the old bell tower, silent now. I remembered peals like glass beads. He remembered sleeping with someone up there amid the bell clanging every quarter hour, and a triumphant holo bout staged with the gutted tower in the background for local color. You don't get memories like that from virtual school.

I suppose you're right – you get others.

A few of the people Mickey talked about I remembered vaguely. When I said I hadn't known someone, he insisted I had, which made me wonder if I'd actually forgotten something.

The hill having been cleared of streets (yellow Monroe, vibrating Hilltop), we couldn't drive past our erstwhile rendezvous place. When, as instructed, alluding to certain days and nights, certain moments, I took note that my tension spiked far more than I'd have expected.

Grinning, he took my hand from my lap. His grip aroused a warm-caramel taste and a pronged fear. "So," he said, "who do you make love to?"

"Anybody. Everybody." The correct answer was "nobody," and I noted and catalogued and remembered and remember the temptation to say

that to this simmering, gray-bearded preacher man with whom I was not going to make love.

Mickey needed both hands on the steering wheel to turn into an alley. A pack of screeching, clambering cats didn't slow him down, and, remembering the days when not all cats were feral, I tried not to store sensations of the car pushing over and through the feline mass. But even now, telling you, I'm alight with a veritable fireworks display of furry, bloody, yowling, toothed and clawed images, and of Mickey grunting and sweating. I thought this was just more of the tour, didn't know he had a destination in mind, certainly didn't guess he had a plan of his own.

He stopped the car. He leaned across, put his hand on my face, and kissed me. For verisimilitude I had to respond. Also for pleasure. Sorry, but it's part of the story. It's why the timing was off.

His odor was a deep red. His hands were all over my devised body, my body remembering his hands and itself from decades and split-seconds earlier, my body wanting to flee and wanting to meet his. Cats watched us from the hood of the car, from a nearby limbless tree trunk, or maybe they weren't watching us, maybe they were just there, acting on instincts made up of cumulative feline memories. I kissed him and kissed him.

Okay. Suffice it to say this went on for a while. Finally managing to bring most of my attention back to the job, I murmured, "Can we go inside someplace? More comfortable? More private? Not so many cats?" That last was my own impulsive whimsy, and I warned myself to be careful. Though there was no script from this point on, whimsy could still cause trouble, as could the nausea in my belly and the palette of hormones flooding my bloodstream.

Your father trailed his hand across my chest, checking out the deliberate anatomy of my secondary sex characteristics. Maybe just for fun, maybe as part of his game plan. "My thoughts exactly," he growled. "Want to show you my pride and joy." He got out of the car. The door handle stymied me for a moment until the memory of how to use it came back, so I had to hurry a few steps to catch up with him.

Arms around each other, his breathing sandpapery and mine like a burrowing worm, we maneuvered through clumps of cats and debris. I know you know the place, but our perceptions of it no doubt differ because our contextual memories are different, so humor me.

The function of alleys used to be segmentation of city blocks into the favored ninety-degree angles, providing access for the primitive municipal services of the day. This vestigial alley didn't lead anywhere or divide anything and was barely demarcated from the leftover cityscape around it. I recognized trash cans and recycle bins, all overflowing with once-commonplace refuse, and I was sickened by the experience and the memories of it, and then I was remembering garages, pavement cracks, wild yellow roses along a back fence.

Following the mnemonic protocol, one of my best, I said, "Rose," then voiced the popping, sparking nodes of the memory web. "Rose. Iris. Daisy. Hollyhock. Marigold. Chrysanthemum."

"Shut up." He clenched my shoulder hard. Feeling, smelling, tasting his rage not far beneath the surface, I allowed myself a tiny, risky satisfaction. It occurred to me that maybe, instead of or in addition to protecting society from Mickey's now-pointless aggression, the Authorities intended to study or harness it for who knew what purposes. Like a suicide bomber from the free-form violence early in this century, except without the passion of martyrdom, I had nothing better to do than to be sacrificed. I do now, thanks to you.

Which makes me vulnerable –

I know, I know. That's my problem, not yours.

"Lily. Violet. Jasmine." I didn't know where I was going with this. I was just going, trusting the process.

His right arm still around me, he swung his left fist into my belly. I sagged against him. Being afraid didn't seem worth the effort. Now it would be. "Shut," he said, "up."

"Poppy," I gasped. "Pansy." I couldn't stop the spreading memory activation, but speaking it was my own contribution to developing your father's rage. It was also fun, in a brinksmanship sort of way.

Yes. I'm not surprised you know what I mean.

Then he stopped and stopped me at what reminded me of a cellar door, in the side of a hill of dirt and garbage and broken concrete. Cellar, with a C. Cellars were cool, dark, dank places where things could be kept for a long time without going bad.

"Pansy," I gasped. "Faces."

His fingers were digging into my shoulder. "You are a strange one, aren't you, girl?"

My split-second choice to let the gender thing go and stay with the activation headlong toward the target node is part of this memory web. It gets complicated. "Some pansies had faces. Designs on their petals. Blue on white. Black on purple." He'd let go of me and was working on getting the door open. I probably could have fled. A few minutes later I would ardently regret that I hadn't. Now I'm glad.

No. No pressure.

I risked the distraction of asking what we were doing. He looked at me. "All your nosy questions about my life, thought I'd show you my life's work," he said, "inspired by you," and the buzz of a distant memory caused a split-second dereliction of duty so that I didn't pursue that subject line right then. He turned back to the stuck door and kept talking. "Anyway, there's a fight tonight. Gotta check who's ready."

I focused on "Face, faces," and that led to "Black on purple bruises. Blue marks on white faces. Yellow welts – " and he told me again to shut up but his fury was now directed in part at the door, which moved but wouldn't give. A mottled cat wended its high-tailed way past us with something moving in its mouth, and I saw your father glance at it, follow a few steps of its progress, but he let it go. That particular memory seems more violent every time it comes up, but I'm not sure the incident itself really was.

Then the door surrendered. Carefully he laid it over on the mound of debris and with less care pushed me toward the opening. I stumbled on the first uneven step but he kept me upright in his hard grasp.

The mnemonic trail seemed to be getting quite far-flung, but I knew to stay with it. Turning my head to say, "A green lampshade," I almost fell again and he caught me again, bruising me. "Acidic violins. Salty snare drum – "

"What the hell are you talking about?" I didn't have an answer yet, and he didn't want one. We'd reached the bottom of the steps and were now in a narrow lightless corridor that smelled like a snake.

Your father was hard behind me, pushing. I was chanting now. "Another noise. Another noise. An – "

We went around or up or down and there were the faces, and the eyes were moving and the mouths, and there it was. This was what I'd heard all those years ago, only now it was many voices instead of just one making the noise, many bodies, and it was different in some sort of spatial way as though it now had more or less volume, had accumulated shape. You heard it. A low howl. Cooing. Sub- or supra-vocalizations. I felt it in my throat. Silver and spherical. I seemed to be on the verge of understanding what it meant and what it would serve as a mnemonic for.

He played his light around the cave, checking, taking stock, showing me. One by one by one and en masse. Limbless torsos, yellow-petalled faces, open mouths without teeth or tongues.

"Was I – What was I – "

"Bull crap, Belle. Don't tell me you forgot. You were the first. The prototype. You gave me the idea. You were already deformed. I didn't have to create that. Didn't have to do a thing. Except get you to my place. Which was easy. Hot to trot, weren't you, Belle? And then keep you there."

"Which wasn't so easy."

"The one that got away." He chuckled. "But you were there long enough for them to see what I had in mind. And the rest is history."

From the nest of things in that speech I could have asked about, I asked, "Who's 'they'?"

"You don't know them. But you will. Someday everybody will know who we are."

"We?" I gestured toward the cave dwellers, estimating there were about twenty of them, adults and children.

Hey, it was dark. And it was hard in some cases to tell which were separate bodies and which was a single body with more than one deformity. And I've never claimed talent with numbers.

"The Underground."

He'd unlocked a kind of silo and opened a chute to let thick liquid pour into a trough. From

the reaction of the others, I guessed it was food and they hadn't eaten for a while. The thought crossed my mind, odd under the circumstances, that Mickey's life would have been a lot easier with modern nutrition dispensers, even household-size. Trying to ignore all the pointless activations (fork, knife, spoon, spatula – do you know what any of those things were?), I asked a question that addressed a remarkably intense personal curiosity more than job requirements. "Where did you – find all these people?"

"They're mine." At the moment, I thought that told me nothing.

Suddenly Mickey yelled and turned on a heavy stream of water and flailed the old-fashioned hose like a whip, lashing the near wall and soaking everyone including himself. Screeches spiked, some of the more mobile people ducked under the trough, and Mickey was a crazy man speaking in tongues and gyrating his heavy dripping body. Then he turned off the water and just stood there, shivering, holding the limp hose. "Spiders," he hissed.

Those who could gathered around the trough and fed in whatever way possible. Those who couldn't waited for Mickey and me to get to them. One seemed to have no mouth. I didn't watch to see what orifice Mickey put the food into.

Oh. Isn't that – backwards? Physiologically speaking? I know I sometimes succumb to nostalgia for the way things used to be, but I mean, really.

"Didn't find them. Made them." On his haunches now, poking at them, holding some of them up to examine more closely, he was boasting, maybe also confessing. "They're my babies."

People call their artwork, computer programs, lab animals, sim pets, social engineering dreams "my babies." It's a peculiar kind of fondness. Coming from a man who'd just fed his "babies" out of a trough in a cave, it almost made me laugh. All I could say was "But – Deanna –"

"Deanna." His voice twisted your name golden in the teeming gloom. "Deanna's my firstborn. Also my first creation. Not my best work. A little rough around the edges, a little primitive. Because it was after birth, and it's supposed to be before, before there's a person. I made a mistake.

God forgives. And she's – special."

"Her leg –" The painful angle of your leg. The painful angle of your glance. The painful angle of the dog's cowering trajectory back to its place through the bad light.

"There was a learning curve. She can't be part of the experiment. They said to destroy her." He tossed one of his babies away and picked up another one. Both squealed. "But I told them that was bullshit and not God's Will."

Oh, Deanna. You wish he had destroyed you? Really? Still?

I don't much like this conversation, either. But it's overdue.

Because if we're going to have a life together we have to understand each other.

Okay. Let me rephrase that. Because if I'm going to live with you and you're going to be my – friend, I need you to understand at least this.

It's not as though either of us has anything else to do at the moment. Nothing's happening. We're prepared in case something does. Neither the Underground nor the Authorities knows where we are, or they don't care, or they haven't gotten around to us yet. Just listen. Can you just listen?

I said, "Nothing here looks aggressive enough to be a fighter." I corrected myself. Give me some credit. "Nobody here."

"Wrong. You should've seen some of the bouts. God-given beauty. I got it from my parents. That was the start – germ-line genetic mod." He was rummaging among the living bodies. "All my babies got it from me."

"Deanna, too?"

"Not Deanna. Not an aggressive bone in her body."

Just listen.

"What about the mothers?" I was fishing.

"Picked 'em as best as I could for aggression, but it turns out the germ-line mods practically always win out, so baby-mamas don't matter all that much." He shot me what I swear was a coy glance. "Be fun to see what you and I would get, though."

Then he was behind me, his forearm hard across my throat and his other hand between my legs. I admit the force wouldn't have been necessary for his purposes; it was for mine. Assault

was my cue and this was certainly assault. But it was grim and metallic-blue instead of the red-energy kind of aggression that I understood the Authorities to be looking for and that I thought I could get him to with just a little more time. So I held off on giving the signal, hoping for an Outstanding rating for once. "What do you want from me?" I managed to ask. "What does the Underground want?"

"Epi-mods." I don't know why I'd never heard the term before. Specialization, I guess. I shook my head. "Epigenetic modification of the species." It was an explosive, prayerful chant.

I took his rough exploration of my crotch as a clue to what he wasn't quite saying, though it might have been just opportunistic. "But I won't be having any children. You wouldn't be able to tell if any of my enhancements are heritable."

"We'll just see, won't we?" He was kissing the back of my neck. His arm was constricting my throat.

I leaned my head back into him, partly as a strategy and partly because I wanted to. Pieces of the feeding mass split off and came closer to us, making memory trails of variegated scent and sound.

You're right, I wasn't really thinking of them as whole, individual people yet. Viviana was one of that early envoy group, I think, and at least two of the triplets.

Your father said into my ear, "Belle Belle, I think you're my fighter for tonight."

"I'm not a fighter."

"We'll see if we can put that killer memory of yours to good use. Somebody who remembers every single thing. Too bad about your eyes, but your privates will get you qualified." With a grope and a sort of groan, he added, "Personally, it's your body I want to see more of. God works in mysterious ways."

Describing hermaphroditic arousal is complicated and irrelevant right now. I'll explain more later –

Or not.

The way he was holding me, the way he was talking, fired a chain of memories. "There was a face. A person."

More and more of your father's babies – your brothers and sisters – were approaching us. He

let me go, and I smelled the snap of the whip, tasted the flash of its arc, heard the spurt of pain at its tip though there was no cry. The silver round sounds stopped, but hung in the air like the way it used to rain.

I raised my voice. "A girl. There was a girl in the back room of your apartment. She made a rustle and she made that noise because she couldn't call out anymore. She smelled young. She wasn't afraid of spiders until you saw one over the bed and then food came in under the door." He cringed and the whip hissed across the floor. "She was almost –"

"Cut the crap." You know how his voice can sound the lowest crooning notes of a cello while his intention is like a blade. You know how that deliberate dissonance underscores the threat. He let me go. "You're the hypermnestic. You remember everything."

The web of nodes was sparking furiously. Almost blind. Blind, bludgeon, bloody lips, lips, kisses. Love. Love? Not quite able to get the target memory, I gasped, "Who?"

"You were the first one. My first subject. My inspiration. Thank you."

I admit that one of the thoughts in my mind then was "Love? Is this love?"

How would I know?

Belle, young woman, almost blind, trapped for days and nights in a back room of Mickey's apartment. No one to rescue me. No one to notice my absence among all my absences. Escape; many windows opened back then, and glass broke. Hilltop wildly vibrating, Winston too hot to stand still. Up the hill, up and out.

"Let's go." The tip of the whip stung my flank. "Gotta get you ready."

And that's when you burst in, and you and your sisters and brothers swarmed over Mickey, and he erupted, and the cave pulsed and swam with all that violence, all that rich focused aggression, and I tried to think of a way I could take it back to my handlers or put it to use on my own.

The enhanced and seasoned warrior, Mickey was winning. He'd already killed or hurt half a dozen of your siblings, their bodies motionless on the floor or in the feeding trough, startlingly more or less deformed than they'd been.

I haven't memorized their names yet. I will.

The lamp had been knocked over and in its angled light Mickey's shadow and yours leaped. I saw the blows you landed with fists and elbows and with your crooked unbending leg like a truncheon. I saw his hands clasp around your neck. I saw on the wall and floor beside me mass movement of primitive creatures with what looked like many more than eight legs activating a gigantic web, and I grabbed handfuls of them and threw them at the two of you, screaming "Spiders!" in case he didn't notice.

Good thing you didn't inherit everything.

Mickey went down and I lost sight of him, and again I could have fled. I think I would have, if you hadn't come to me and held out your hand. It didn't take much.

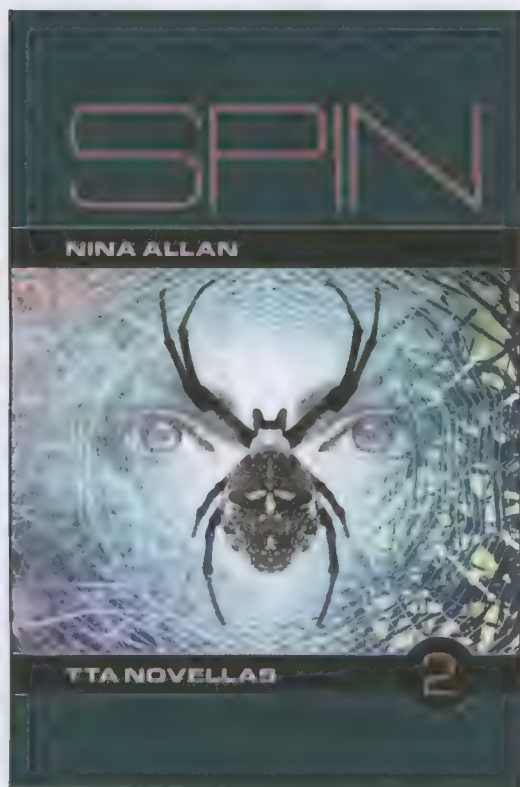
Of course they'll find us. Some "they" or other.

In the meantime, the cave is as much home as anywhere has ever been. Mickey's nonsense

hymns and meaningless preaching provide entertainment, and sometimes when he touches me it doesn't matter that he has no clue. Viviana and Minnette and Hannah-Janna-Savannah and all the others – I'll learn them, give me some time – are an infinite source of memories. And I love you, and I remember loving you, and I will remember remembering.

Melanie Tem's work has received the Bram Stoker, International Horror Guild, British Fantasy, and World Fantasy Awards, as well as a nomination for the Shirley Jackson Award. She is also a published poet, and several of her plays have been produced. She is a social worker, and also has a freelance editing business. She lives in Colorado with her husband, writer and editor Steve Rasnic Tem. They have four children and four granddaughters. Melanie has a story – 'Singularity' – in the forthcoming *Crimewave 12*. Melanie's website is www.m-s-tem.com.

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THE INTERNATIONAL STUDBOOK OF THE GIANT PANDA

—
CARLOS HERNANDEZ

part one

It's a cool Pacific-coast morning when I pull up to the gate of the American Panda Mission's campus. Security is tight: two guards cradling M-16s and girdled in kevlar ask me what I am doing here.

"Gabrielle Reál, San Fransisco Squint?" I say, giving them my best can-you-big-strong-men-help-me? eyes. "I have an appointment with Ken Cooper?"



One guard walkie-talkies in my press credentials. The other stares at me behind reflective sunglasses. Nothing inspires silence quite like a machine gun.

Finally: "OK, Ms Real, just head straight, then take the first right you see. Mr Cooper will be waiting for you."

I follow the almost-road to a nondescript warehouse. Outside, park ranger and chief robot-panda operator Kenneth Cooper is waiting for me. Full disclosure: Cooper and I used to date. Which is why you're stuck with me on this story instead of some boring, legitimate journalist.

Cooper's been Californiaized. Back when I knew him he was a hypercaffeinated East-coaster working on a Biology M.S. Now he's California blond, California easy, eternally 26 (he's actually 37). Flip-flops, bermudas, a white, barely-buttoned shirt that's just dying to fall off his body. Not exactly the Ranger Rick ensemble I was hoping to tease him about.

I park and get out; I'm barely on terra firma before Cooper's bagpiping the air out of me. "So good to see you, Gabby!" he says.

I break off the embrace, but keep ahold of his hands and look him up and down. "Looking good, Mr Cooper. Remind me: why did we break up again?"

"You were still at Amherst. And I left for California. This job."

I let go, put a hand on my hip. "Biggest mistake of your life, right?"

He holds out his hand again – wedding ring – and I take it, and we fall into a familiar gait as we stroll to the warehouse, as if we'd been walking hand in hand all these years without the interruptions of time and space and broken hearts.

"Don't be jealous," he says. "There's room enough in my heart for you and pandas."

The warehouse isn't as big as it looks from the outside. Straight ahead and against the back wall is mission control, where a half-dozen science-types wear headsets and sit behind terminals, busily prepping for the mission of the day. From this distance it looks like a NASA diorama.

To the left are cubicles, a meeting area, and the supercomputer that does most of the computational heavy lifting for APM. On the right is a

makeshift workshop – benches, spare parts, soldering irons, and a 3D printer big enough to spit out a zamboni. Maybe that's where they print all their science-types.

And in the center of it all, a gigantic pair of headless panda suits.

I move in for a closer look. The suits are suspended like marionettes from wires that connect to a rig in the ceiling. They're pretty realistic, both to eye and touch, except that each is about the size of a well-fed triceratops.

"Gabby," Cooper says, "I'd like you to meet the greatest advancement in panda procreation since sperm meets egg: Avalon and Funicello."

"Cute names."

But I can barely speak. Their panda-musk fills the entire warehouse. It's greasy and rancid; it smells like I'm eating it. And here's the recipe: buy the grossest musk-scented antiperspirant you can find and melt it in a pan. Then use it as the binder for a bear meat tartare.

But why douse the suits in funky pheromones at all? It's not like any real pandas are here to smell them. Right, Ken?

"In a few minutes," he replies, "you will become a genuine panda. If every bit of our work weren't one hundred percent real, it would be useless."

By "real" Cooper means that he and I will be donning these panda suits to remotely operate the most realistic robot animals the world has ever known. Those two robots are miles away from the warehouse, where they live among and regularly interact with APM's real giant pandas. Whatever we do in the suits, the field robots will mimic exactly.

And usually what APM does is sex. Sometimes they use Funicello to collect semen from one of the "boars", or male pandas. Other times they'll use Avalon to inseminate a sow, using semen collected earlier.

And sometimes it's just robots fucking. Avalon and Funicello simulate coition in front of a live panda audience so that the reproductively-challenged bears can learn where babies come from. That's our mission today, in fact: to demonstrate for APM's male pandas the proper way to impregnate a female. And playing the female lead in today's performance is yours truly.

Cooper and I remained close even after he left for California. He knew I'd come to Cali for the job at The Squint, and he knew getting the scoop on APM's secret operations could have made my career as a science correspondent. But he rejected my every request, just like APM rejected every other journalist. The nonprofit has been secretive from the moment it was founded. If you engage in virtual bestiality, no matter how noble your scientific goals, you're going to make some enemies – and in APM's case that includes paramilitary terrorists. They've learned to keep a lid on things.

So why am I here, now? Because – speaking of paramilitary terrorists – APM's still reeling from the fallout of their worst-case scenario: five months ago, Constance Ritter, a 22:19 saboteur, was killed on-premises. The means of execution was robot panda.

After the PR fiasco that ensued, APM now sees the need for more transparency in their operations. Step one of damage-control is, apparently, me. I can hear Cooper pitching me now: "Let's suit her up so she can tell the world just how effective our methods are. Sure, she's a Media Studies major who I had to tutor night and day to get her to pass Biology for Non-Majors, but all she'll be doing is operating a multi-million dollar robot in order to seduce and sexually satisfy a giant panda boar. How hard can it be?"

And somehow, impossibly, APM said yes.

I've never had a more terrifying assignment, and I've been in war-zones. I have no idea how to have panda sex. What if I'm terrible? Wait, what do I mean "if"? *Of course* I will be terrible at panda sex. The real question, Ken Cooper, is what if the pandas imitate my terrible panda sex and never reproduce again?

"You'll do fine," says Cooper. "You're going to be the sow. Our all-male audience will be imitating me, not you. All you do is lie there and take what I give you."

I raise an eyebrow. "Isn't that the line you used on me when we first met?"

"Works on pandas too."

Oh, that smile. Mama warned me about robot panda jockeys like you, Ken Cooper.

chances of an entire species, Cooper takes me to the office of Dr Mei Xiadon, 59, project lead for the American Panda Mission. Dr Xiadon's going to teach me how to use the panda suit to operate the field robots.

We enter her office. From ceiling to floor, electronics spill from every surface, a cascade of circuitry and servos and screws. A wall of gray-grim lockers stand against the far wall, making the room even more claustrophobic. The desk is buried in half-finished robotics and paperwork fingerprinted with grease-stains. It looks like it came from a film-school sci-fi movie set.

Seated behind the desk is the woman herself. One of the foremost giant panda experts in the world, Xiadon spent a decade directing the celebrated Wolong Panda Center in China. That was something of a coup, seeing as she is not Chinese, but Chinese-American. APM was able to lure her back to the States with the promise of putting her at the helm of the most cutting-edge panda conservancy in the world.

"Mei?" says Cooper.

Dr Xiadon, startled, looks up from her work. She's about five-foot-nothing. Veins of silver run through her black hair, which is coiffed into a Chinese schoolgirl's bowlcut. Her button-down APM-branded denim shirt is baggy enough for shoplifting. She has small features, except for her mouth. Her big, round, harmless teeth seem only good for smiling. But, as her expression changes from surprise to pleasure, I can see they're very good at that.

"Oh! You're Gabby!" she says, suddenly coming alive. She throws herself halfway over her desk to shake my hand. "Ken's told me all about you."

"It's an honor and a pleasure to meet you, Dr Xiadon. I'm so happy to have a chance to – oh my God, are those panda thumbs on your wrists?!"

"Yes they are!" says Xiadon, showing off her prosthetics. She makes them wiggle, which makes my stomach flip. "Aren't they great?"

One thing that makes pandas unique is their "thumb", a sixth digit that is actually a wrist bone free-floating in the tendons of their forelimbs. They use those thumbs primarily to cut open bamboo – a neat little adaptation that, coupled with their unique throats and the special mix of

To help ensure I don't ruin the reproductive

enzymes in their guts, make the pandas' weird choice in cuisine viable.

"Why did you get those?" I ask her. "So you could understand pandas better?"

Ask a stupid question. But she lets me down easy. "Naw," she says, and grabs a mailer tube lying like a fallen log on her desk. She jabs a panda thumb into one end, sinking it all the way through the thick cardboard, and slices the tube all the way to the other, in one clean stroke. The papers inside the mailer flower open and waft onto her desk. "I just use them to cut packages open."

"You must get a lot of packages," I say dryly.

"Tons," she says dryly.

It's Xiadon's job to teach me everything there is to know about operating a robot panda. Well, everything I can learn from her in an hour.

But first, Xiadon heads over to the lockers to try to find me a "superdermal", the form-fitting special suit one wears to operate a robot panda. They look like dive skins, except that they are studded head to toe with chrome-colored rivets.

After some searching, she turns around and holds up a rubbery, doll-sized unitard. Peeking around it, she smiles and says, "Why are you still dressed, babycakes? Strip and put this on."

In no time I'm down to bra and thong. I stop and look at her. "This naked?"

"Ken, get the hell out of here!" she says, laughing.

"What?" shrugs Ken. "It's nothing I haven't seen before."

"Out." And Ken sulks off.

Then, back to me, smiling. "Nakeder."

I get nakedest. Xiadon tosses me a superdermal.

It looks too small for me. It looks too small for a spider monkey. But as I put it on it stretches in surprisingly accommodating ways. One foot, then the next, then the arms, then the good doctor zips me up in back. I'm in.

Nothing's pinching, nothing's too tight – being an A-cup is a bonus today. I am starting to sweat a little. "Good," says Xiadon. "Sweat helps the connections."

She brandishes the helmet I'll be wearing. It looks like a bear skull made from machined aluminum, with rubbery black patches hold-

ing it together. The eyes are covered with what reminds me of the metal weave of a microphone. In all, it looks like the love child of a panda and a fly.

Inside the helmet – it's a two-piece affair that's assembled around the head – I see a jutting plastic sleeve for my tongue, and a pair of tubes that will go disturbingly far up my nostrils. Xiadon turns the mask so I can get a good look at it from every terrifying angle. I think she's enjoying my horror.

"You've been taking the pills we've sent you?" she asks.

I have. Since receiving this assignment, I began a regimen of capsules that delivered a cocktail of chemicals and nanotechnology. In conjunction with this helmet, they presumably will help my brain process the sensory experiences the field robot will receive. My sense of smell will be as good as a panda's, Cooper told me. I haven't noticed any improvements leading up to today.

"You wouldn't," says Xiadon. "It only works when you're in the suit."

But that begs the question I've been dying to ask. "This is all so complicated, Dr Xiadon. Brain-altering chemicals, nanotech, virtual reality suits, robot pandas – it's like one of those overly elaborate schemes supervillains concoct in B-movies. There must be an easier way to save the pandas."

"Actually, there isn't," she says. She places the helmet-halves on her desk, then leans against it and crosses her legs at the ankles. "I've been doing this a long time. We've tried mating pandas in captivity. Terrible track record. We've tried artificial insemination. Not much better. We've tried releasing them back into the wild. Abysmal. We have decades of brilliant scientists with excellent funding and the goodwill of the entire world failing to increase panda numbers. So you've got to ask, why?"

"The problem," she says, grabbing the faceplate of the helmet and studying it as she speaks, "is us. Humans. We pollute animal behavior. We ruin instinct. So we need to stay as far away from pandas as possible, while still using everything we know to help them help themselves.

"So how do we do that? By building a surrogate bear, one so realistic they will accept it

as one of their own, but imbued with human smarts. Through them, we can collect semen in literally the most natural way possible. Same goes for delivering that semen. And best of all, we can use the robots to show pandas how to mate, so that one day, when there are enough of them, not only will they not need us anymore, they won't want us anywhere near them."

"But the robots are controlled by humans. Isn't that pretty much the same thing? Won't that pollute panda behavior too?"

She hands me the faceplate face-down, so that I'm looking at the tubes and tongue-sleeve. "That's what this is for. There's a giant panda inside you, Gabby. All we have to do is bring it to the surface."

Cooper is already inside of and operating Avalon when Xiadon and I head out to the main room. Specifically, he's running in place, thanks to the wires that keep the panda suit suspended so that its paws only just scrape the floor.

It's mesmerizing, watching him run in the suit. It's nothing like the goofy loping you usually see on nature shows or at the zoo. This is cheetah-fast, the back legs long-jumping forward, lunging as far as Avalon's shoulder, while the forepaws push powerfully off the ground. Then, for a split second, the forelegs reach forward and the hindlegs stretch back, and the panda suit flies.

"Isn't that a little speedy for a panda?" I ask Dr Xiadon.

Her eyes are locked on the panoramic bank of viewscreens above the two panda suits. It looks like we're getting an Avalon-eye view onscreen, since all I see is a bear snout and a nonstop rush of bamboo.

"Ken's not acting like a panda right now," Xiadon says. And I can see instantly that she's pulled a Yoda on me. Before she was funny, friendly, even silly: not the Jedi Master I'd flown halfway across the galaxy to speak to. But this Xiadon is hard, shrewd, all-business. This is the Xiadon who runs APM when nosy journalists aren't around. "There must be a problem."

And when I don't seem to get it, she adds, "Terrorists."

We hustle to mission control, where everyone is anxious and moving fast. Dr Anita Deepra-

shad, APM's mission manager, fills us in. "Avalon has been shot," she says.

"Damage?" asks Xiadon.

None: the robot pandas have withstood a shotgun slug at twenty yards, and this joker had apparently shot at the robot using some "Oscar Meyer rifle" that, according to Deeprashad, "didn't even muss Avalon's hair."

Deeprashad is late-sixties, with long braided hair as bright as sea salt. She's wearing a glorious gold and purple sari, and sports an onyx-and-pearl panda bindi on her forehead. Yet she talks like a Hollywood action hero. California infects absolutely everyone.

"Any real pandas hurt or killed?" Xiadon asks. No and no, says Deeprashad.

Now Xiadon can relax a little. "And the terrorists?"

"Chasing one of them down." Their eyes meet. They don't say a word, but I can break their eyebrow Morse code. They're both suddenly worried that another PR debacle could occur if Ken mutilates another 22:19er with me in the room. They're silently debating whether to have me escorted away.

"Nope," I say. "I'm staying right here."

They both sigh, resigned.

"Ken's the best there is," says Xiadon. I think she means it, but it sounds like she's trying to convince herself.

By contrast, there's no doubt what Deeprashad means. "You're about to see the professionalism and restraint we exercise when arresting these criminals," she says, taking my hand and patting it in an endearingly un-American way. "Ken has a light touch when dealing with these 22:19 scum. Not like me. I'd pop the bastards' heads off like I was thumbing open champagne."

And...scene. You were beautiful Anita, beautiful! You're going to be a big star, baby! Huge!

APM's archenemy is 22:19, a group that takes its name from that chapter and verse from Exodus: "Whosoever lieth down with an animal shall be put to death." They formed about a decade ago in objection to any animal husbandry practice where humans harvest sperm from an animal. It doesn't matter that you're getting off an animal for science, says 22:19. Bestiality is bestiality in

the eyes of the Lord.

22:19 started by attacking turkey farms and horse-breeding facilities, becoming increasingly more aggressive as time went on. But they gained their greatest notoriety once they declared war against the American Panda Mission. They capitalized on the perceived twin abominations of modern technology and the erosion of Christian values in American politics to appeal to radical Christian denominations. It wasn't long before some of them saw 22:19ers as God-touched heroes waging a holy crusade against the evils of science.

With an influx of capital and new members, 22:19's salvos became progressively more audacious, especially against APM. They claimed responsibility for the arson two years ago that caused more than \$16 million in damage to APM equipment and prompted the move to this new facility. Their growing infamy and belligerence caused the United States to classify them as a terrorist organization.

Predictably, that label initially bolstered their numbers. But it also meant, under the most recent iteration of the Patriot Act, these "enemy combatants" could be captured or even killed by any citizen or legal alien of the United States without fear of prosecution.

Not too many enemy combatants have been killed or captured on U.S. soil by U.S. citizens. In fact, all combatants so captured have been from 22:19 by APM. To accomplish this feat, APM has employed the most unlikely anti-terrorism technology ever conceived: the robot giant panda.

It sounds funny, I know. But make no mistake: the robot giant pandas are shockingly effective. Their metal skeletons shrug off bullets like snowflakes, they can run through bamboo-dense terrain at 50 kph, and we have evidence of just how easily they can end human life. Two 22:19ers trespassed onto the APM campus on November 5, 2027. One of them filmed the other's death.

Constance Ritter, the 22:19 member who was killed, had a head that was just as firmly attached to her neck as anyone else's when the day began. But as the footage shows, a second later the robot Greg Furst was jockeying took a swipe at her, and tick, her head flies out of frame in a split-second. Her body takes a comparatively

long time to kneel, then topple over. The male 22:19er, never identified, runs through the dense bamboo whisper-crying "Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit" for the rest of the clip.

APM has the legal authority to kill 22:19 trespassers, and given how much stronger a robot panda is than a human, it's something of a miracle more people haven't died. But as APM found out the hard way, in terms of public perception, even one death is one too many.

Back on the monitors, the bamboo forest has given way to an open field. We can now make out, faintly in the distance, a man is running away from the robot as if his life depended on it. Behind him, the robot's closing, fast.

It's extraordinary, watching the panda-mime Cooper is performing for us live while, above him, the silent viewscreens show us the field robot rising and falling as it runs in exact synchronicity. The two are precisely linked – if there is any lag, my eye can't detect it.

With each galumph, the robot closes the gap between itself and the suspect. Terrorist or no, part of me can't help but root for the running, terrified human. This looks like the kind of villain-cam you get in horror movie chase-scenes.

We can see the terrorist clearly now: dressed in Eddie Bauer camouflage and toting a rifle that looks plenty dangerous to me. But according to Deeprashad, against robot pandas you might as well be throwing raw hotdogs.

Cooper leaps one last time – the Avalon-suit extends into a full Superman stretch – and when the onscreen robot lands, his quarry vanishes beneath it.

"Got him," Cooper reports seconds later, his voice throaty with adrenaline. The control room cheers.

In person, Cooper has bellyflopped onto the floor and lies there, splayed like a rug. The field robot, following suit, has bellyflopped onto its quarry.

The robot panda will lounge upon the flattened suspect until backup arrives. Said suspect will be charged with a long list of offenses, both state and federal. He'll have the full weight of the Patriot Act thrown at him. That means life imprisonment is on the table in California. At the

federal level, so is execution.

But his first journey will be to the hospital. Cooper reports he heard “a loud crack” when he landed. The suspect is now “mooring like a sick cow.”

Deeprashad moans a little. Xiadon is hard, expressionless. They’re both wondering if they made a grave mistake allowing me to witness this.

“How badly is he hurt, Ken?” asks Deeprashad.

Seconds pass. Xiadon and Deeprashad exchange looks. Then: “No worries, Anita,” Cooper replies. “This jerk will have his day in court. He’ll probably just be wearing a cast on his gun arm that day.”

Cooper has joined us at mission control, catching his breath after the chase. He sits bare chested, the top half of the unitard hanging limply in front of him, his metal, bug-eyed panda helmet on his lap.

He’s smiling like an MVP and, like an MVP, can’t wait to tell the press about his game-winning play.

“The hardest part is getting back enough of your humanity before things go bad,” he says, pouring water alternately in his mouth or over his head. “That’s what happened to poor Greg. He just couldn’t become human again in time.”

“So people lose control of themselves when they operate the pandas?” I ask. “Is that what happened to Furst?”

“No,” says Xiadon.

“Yes,” says Deeprashad.

They have an eyebrow duel for a few minutes. Then Xiadon says, “Kind of. We train our jockeys relentlessly, and we have kill-switches and overrides here at mission control to take over if the jockey loses control. But we all blew it that day: Furst, me, Anita, everyone at mission control. It just happened too fast. Really, it was just like any other animal attack. You know when you hear how an animal trainer who’s been working with the same tiger or killer whale for years is suddenly mauled, out of nowhere? That’s what happened. Furst surprised us all, most of all himself.”

“But Furst isn’t a tiger or an orca,” I say. “He’s a highly-trained human being doing highly-specialized work.”

Cooper is shaking his head. “Gabby, I said it before and I’ll say it again. We’re not acting like pandas out there. Acting doesn’t work; the pandas see right through us. We go to great lengths to *become* pandas.”

Talk like this makes me wince, especially from Cooper, who I knew in a former incarnation. It’s a little too crunchy for a girl who had to spend decades purging her Latino, magical-realist childhood out of her reason. “Look, I understand the importance of your work here. Really. You use robots so that they can look and smell right. You do everything you can to put yourselves in the right mindset. But at the end of the day it’s still acting. There’s no way to forget you’re just a human being playing the role of panda bear.”

Xiadon and Deeprashad interrupt each other explaining how wrong I am. All the technology both inside (the nanotech, the chemicals) and out (the unitard, the helmet, the panda suit) give jockeys a near-perfect panda perspective of the world. Thanks to a process called “migraineal suppression”, the left brain’s ability to process language, reason causally, and in short think like a human will be reduced to be more in-line with ursine IQ; via “cerebellar promotion”, the mammalian brain will take over the lion’s share of the decision-making process; through “synesthetic olfactory emulation”, the operator’s sense of smell will become the primary way of getting information about the world, borrowing some processing power from the brain’s occipital lobe. And so on – they release a cataract of jargon, each doctor trying to out-science the other. They might as well be reciting from *Finnegan’s Wake*.

Finally Cooper gets a word in edgewise. “With all due respect, Doctors, talking’s exactly the wrong way to go about this. Let’s get Gabby inside a bear. Then she’ll get it.”

part two

I’m crawling into the suspended suit that will give me control of Funicello. The entrance to the suit is, of course, the ass. I have to goatse my way in. Lovely.

It’s dark in there, but there’s a light at the end

of the tunnel: the neck-hole through which I'll stick my head.

The suit, still suspended on wires – couldn't they have lowered it to make getting in easier – sways gently as I earthworm forward. On the way, I feel metal rivets, like the ones studding my unitard, embedded in the suit. "Am I supposed to line up the studs on my outfit with the ones in the suit or something?" I yell.

No answer. Cooper had told me that no one would speak to me once I entered the suit, but I thought I'd try. How am I supposed to figure out what to do if no one tells me?

I slip my arms into the forelegs and my legs into the hindlegs. I was sure I was going to be too slight to be able to operate this monster, but actually I fit pretty well; it conforms surprisingly snugly to my petite person.

I thrust my head through the neck. Cooper is there waiting for me, austere and erect, holding aloft the panda helmet, one half in each hand. He looks like Joan of Arc's squire standing at the ready to help her don her armor. Of course, that makes me Joan of Arc in this conceit, which is kind of how I feel: heroic, but a little looney too.

If the idea of being fastened into a metal helmet à la The Man in the Iron Mask sounds claustrophobic to you, let me make it worse. The tongue sleeve makes me feel like I'm being intubated. The nose tubes, that I have to snort like a coke-fiend as Cooper feeds them up each nostril, feel like they're touching my frontal lobes by the time they're all the way in.

Cooper fastens the helmet around my head, screw by screw; slowly my world fades to black. Even after several minutes in the helmet I can't see a thing. My eyes must have adjusted by now, but there is just no light in here to strike my retinas. It's vacuum-of-space quiet in here too. All I can do is breathe and wait.

The panda musk.

I smell it now (with my human nose). It's still got a sharp, umami tang, but it's not as overwhelming as it was before. I take it in breath by breath, and it modulates from being obnoxious, to being interesting, to just being. Soon it's the new normal.

They activate the suit. No vision yet, no sound, no cybernetically enhanced smell or taste: just

feeling. The suit merges with my body, becomes one with my idea of myself. I am huge now, heavy, and much, much stronger. I can sense a great reserve of strength in my limbs and jaws, just waiting for me to order it around. My head is gigantic. My hands are monstrous paws, and they have panda thumbs, which I know exactly how to use.

They must be activating the suit in stages, I realize. The first stage was just for me to get a feel for this body, grow accustomed to its power, its gravitas. The second stage is to synchronize the suit with the field robot I'll be controlling, so that I begin to operate it from the same position it is in now.

The suit starts to move. I'm just along for the ride. I try to stop the suit's movements just to see if I can, strain against the moving limbs. I fail.

I'm now curled up on the ground. I can feel grass tickling my belly. My head is resting on my arms. It seems that my first job as a bear will be to wake up.

My ears come online. I hear birdsong and wind, the rustle of bamboo gently swaying, like wooden wind chimes.

Now my virtual eyes open, slowly, sleepily. The first thing I see is my nose: white fur, black tip. Beyond it I see my foreleg, where my nose is tucked. The fur feels coarse against my snout.

I experiment with lifting my head; it is exactly as easy as lifting my human head. I didn't feel or hear any actuators or servos helping me. It's all just me. I'm a bear, I'm in a clearing, and I see a bamboo forest before me.

My stomach itches. Before I know what I am doing, I get up on all fours, then lean back and fall on my well-padded bear-fanny. I don't have to think about balance; my body knows what to do. And so, still scanning the area, I lazily scratch my belly.

There is no difference between satisfying a virtual itch and a real one. Both feel wonderful.

This whole experience feels wonderful. This is amazing. I think I understand now how all-encompassing this virtual reality can be. I sit scratching and taking in my surroundings and marveling at how uncanny this all is. It really feels like I'm a panda.

But I'm wrong. I have no idea what it means to

be a panda. Not yet.

Not until they activate the nose.

.....
Early humans had a much better sense of smell and taste than we do today. Studies have shown that, depending on the individual, somewhere between 40%–70% of the genes devoted to those senses are inactive in modern homo sapiens.

While those with a mere 40% of their olfactory genes deactivated might make excellent sommeliers, those with 70% get along just fine. “We don’t need acute olfaction and gustation to detect traces of poison or putrefaction the way our ancestors did,” says Dr Natalie Borelli, a Cal Tech professor of biocybernetics and director of Good Taste, a federally-funded program trying to create a prosthetic human tongue that allows users to both taste and speak. “We don’t need to sniff out our food, or detect camouflaged predators. For us, there are very few situations in which smell is a matter of life and death.”

But for the panda, smell serves as the organizing principle for life. Sight just tells the bears what’s in front of them at the moment – and for the panda, it doesn’t even do that very well. Pandas have relatively weak eyesight, and even if they could see better, most of the time they’d be staring at the same informationless wall of bamboo just inches from their snouts. Hearing gives them more range than sight, but is similarly limited to the here and now.

Smell, however, tells the history of their territory reaching back months. Sometimes you will see a panda approach a tree or a large rock and seem to snarl at it. But that lip-curling, called the “flehmen response”, actually exposes its vomeronasal organ, which allows it to detect the pheromones of other pandas. Those pheromones tell it what pandas have been in the area, how recently, their genders, how big they are – vitally important if you’re weighing your chances in a fight for a mate – and how close females are to estrus.

That last bit is especially important. Sows are in estrus for a bedevilingly short time, sometimes for only a single day of the year. But thanks to his vomeronasal organ, a panda boar knows when that all-important day will be. A boar will enjoy most of mating season not by mating, but by mellowing out to estrogen-drenched sow-pee,

growing accustomed to the pleasures of its one-of-a-kind bouquet, recognizing it as friendly and desirable, and having their testicles triple in size through a process called “spermatogenesis”.

This is a key aspect to how pandas mate in the wild, a lesson humans were slow to learn when they tried to mate captive bears. Without this long, leisurely process of familiarization, a boar is more likely to maul a sow than mate with her: which, unfortunately, has led to the maiming or death of more than a few eligible she-bears in captivity, sometimes in front of a horrified zoo-going crowd.

For the most part, pandas are solitary creatures. There is no common term for a group of pandas. We could default to the generic terms for groups of bears: a “sleuth” or a “sloth”. We could take one of the ad-hoc suggestions from the Internet: a “cuddle”, an “ascension”, a “contrast”, or my favorite, a “monium” of pandas. But the fact is there isn’t much need to speak of pandas in groups, since they spend almost all of their time alone.

There are two exceptions. One is when a mother is tending to a newborn cub. Even then, however, you wouldn’t speak of a group of pandas, since the mother usually gives birth to a pair of cubs but tends to only one, leaving the other to die. Mother and cub will go their separate ways once the cub can fend for itself.

The other exception, however, is that fateful day when a sow is ready to mate. Then it can truly be said that pandas gather. Boars will contend with each other – usually through demonstrations of strength rather than battles to the death – for the right to conceive.

This is a panda behavior that has become increasingly rare in the wild, since panda numbers have dwindled so dangerously low. But its resurrection may hold the key to a true resurgence of the population.

For you see, while the victor gets the sow, the losers get the consolation prize of watching the winner’s happy ending play out before them. It is in this fashion that younger, less-experienced boars are taught the ins and outs (ahem) of mating.

Biologists have tried to use videos of pandas having sex to mimic this effect for captive pan-

das. But humans found panda porn much more interesting than pandas ever did. There's no substitute for the live show. A panda can't trust anything it can't smell.

But if the scents are right and the sounds are right, would-be suitors will find themselves a nice vantage point and spy on the mating couple. Yet another distinction between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom collapses: we are not the only animals who voyeur.

Perhaps the best term for a group of pandas is an "exhibition".

I inhale the world in a way no human ever could. Scarves of scent, of all aromatic "colors", ride the wind, wending their way from all over the bamboo forest into my nose. When I open my mouth, even more smells rush in. I respire, and in comes all Creation.

But this is my first minute as a panda; I don't know how to differentiate between particular odors. I can tell flora from fauna, I can smell the sweet rot of dead plants, the thiol-thick stench of animals decomposing. But I lack the lexicon of fragrances to link each hyper-distinct scent with the real-world object that generates it.

All I know is I smell a lot of death. I'm stunned at how pervasive it is, how relentless. Pandas are often portrayed as peaceful and contemplative, but with all the decay that must unstoppably flood their noses every waking second of their lives, it would be impossible for a panda to be a Buddhist. It inhales suffering every second of its life. Were I a panda full-time, I'd spend my days raging against heaven for its indefatigable cruelty.

The strongest non-rot odor is the musk of other pandas. That I find, to my surprise, I quite enjoy. Now I know why, back at APM headquarters, they go to the trouble of dousing the suits with that noxious, bestial cologne. That musk is my lighthouse, my Rosetta Stone. That's how I will know Ken Cooper.

Or rather, that's how I will know Avalon, the robot-bear he's jockeying. There are at least four boars in the area, but only one musk smells like his. All I have to do is wait. Cooper will find me.

But so will the other bears. And that frightens me. I don't trust other bears. I don't trust any-

thing. All this death. What I want to do is head into the forest of bamboo and sit quietly and hide, and maybe eat.

Oh God, yes, please, I need food. I'm starving.

Basically, I'm paranoid and famished. If you want to know what it's like to be a panda on the cheap, get high by yourself, and fill your fridge with nothing but bamboo shoots to snack on. Oh, and kill some mice and leave them to rot in their traps.

Eat or fuck? Eat or fuck?

Fuck.

I might be killed. Go fuck. I'm so hungry. Go fuck. No, no, not out in the open. Anything can see me. I want to go deep into the bamboo and hide and eat quietly.

No, Gabby. Go fuck.

I go fuck.

My head is raised and calling out. I am making noise. This is insanity. I want to shut my mouth, stop announcing my presence, but I can't. (I literally can't. Mission control – i.e. Xiadon and Deeprashad – partially operates the bear, making it call out and urinate as I walk. I can feel liquid trickling down my legs, but I can't stop it.)

Bears. They're coming. They're converging on me. I know them by their odors.

I stop, sit. I'm still peeing uncontrollably; my bear-ass is getting wet.

This isn't much of a clearing, but it'll do. And if I need to run away, the bamboo forest is right here, ready to envelop me, hide me.

I can hear one of the boars now. I don't see him. He's sliding through the bamboo, slow and deliberate. I can hear the shape of his body as he pushes stalks aside and comes for me.

He's grunting, low and repetitive. Each grunt sends a thrill racing over my skin. I can barely remember I am me.

There's another boar. He's farther away, but his smell is more intense. Something deep within me groans. My need flowers.

A third approaches, but I don't care. The second bear, his smell. I'm intoxicated. I want him.

That's not Avalon, human me, barely audible, thinks. Where is Cooper?

On-cue, Deeprashad's voice enters my head. "Sorry about this, Gabby, but we're going to have

to pull the plug. We located the second terrorist. Ken's en-route to help capture him. So we won't be able to continue. We're going to move the robot to a safe space and shut you down."

I know she said this to me, because I heard the recorded transcript earlier. But here, now, inside Funicello, I have no idea. All I know is that's a big, glorious, scary-ass bear coming for me. I can hear his massive ursine body parting the forest.

The first suitor moves to intercept the big bear. I hear them meet. There are growls and yelps, and what sounds like a brief chase. Then the first suitor runs off, yelping and crying.

Apparently Deeprashad's been trying to talk to me all this time. "Can you hear me, Gabby? Gabrielle Réal, are you there?"

Something in my voice gives both of them pause.

"She's there," says Xiadon. "But she's a bear."

"I need to override Funicello and extract Gabby ASAP. Just waiting for your order, Mei."

I'm not following this conversation very well, but I know they're about to separate me from the bear that is juggernauting through the bamboo forest to find me. I don't think this in words, but in whatever way a languageless mammalian brain constructs thoughts, I think to myself, over and over, *I want to stay. Please don't take me.*

"Gui Gui is moving in quickly," Xiadon says. "He subdued Wei Wei. He might be ready, Anita."

"Oh Jesus. Not now."

I'm punchy and dizzy and scared and happy and I don't have a clue what I'm saying or hearing. All I know is that big bear is trudging toward me again. And every step makes my flesh horripilate.

"All Gabby has to do," says Xiadon, "is stick her ass in the air and present. If Gui Gui does nothing, no harm, no foul. But if he's interested -"

"You can't be serious," says Deeprashad.

I face the direction of the incoming boar. He's still just a jumble of rustling sounds and a pheromone bouquet, but both are getting stronger. I call out to him, this time because I want to. Inside the helmet I call out; I sound congested and tongue-tied thanks to the tongue-sleeve and the tubes up my nose. But at the same time I call, I hear the robot bleat like a panda sow at the height of estrus. I might burst before he gets here.

But here he is, his moon-sized head peaking through the bamboo. My god he's massive. His mouth is open; he is flehmening me like a heavy-breather. I have never been so scared, so ready. He is so beautiful.

"We've got to stop this, Mei," says Deeprashad.

"Too late," says Xiadon, not the least bit unhappy. "Gabby, can you hear me? Gabby, you're going to have to go through with this. Don't worry. We'll help control you from here. Just relax, no sudden moves."

It takes all of my intellectual power, but I am able to produce two words: "Okay. Yes. Yes. Okay. Yes. Okay."

Gui Gui comes into the clearing, approaching neither slow nor fast. I rise. We touch noses; his lip rises, and he takes my odor in his mouth, eats it. He licks my face a few times. I lick his, my human tongue sliding back and forth in the helmet's sleeve.

"Jesus," says Deeprashad. "You sure you haven't done this before, Gabby?"

The boar moves behind me, smells me from behind. He jams in his nose, machine-gun sniffs my most sensitive parts. He nuzzles and licks. I turn to sniff him. We make a yin-yang of ourselves, inhaling each other's backsides. This is his musk at full strength. I'm drunk, terrified, ready.

Somewhere off in the distance I hear Xiadon saying over and over, "Now, Gabby! Present! Face on the ground, butt in the air!"

The front of me drops to the ground; I raise my rear up. I briefly wonder if the other bears can see us. But to be honest, I don't really care. This is for me.

Gui Gui mounts me. He mostly supports his own weight. I adjust to make us fit together better, then press my backside into him. And he presses forward.

The suit doesn't stimulate my human genitals, or any part of my brain in charge of sexual satisfaction. I don't orgasm, not even close. What I receive instead is communion. The event horizon that constitutes my sense of self grows outward. I breathe in the ground beneath me through my nose, and it becomes me; I inhale the stalks of bamboo that surround us, and I am they; I am the boar who mates with me, and I am

all the death in the forest. But I am the life, too. Two other boars are in trees nearby – yes, I’ve smelled them out – watching, learning. I snort them into me, snort up more and more the forest, the world, until it’s no longer useful or desirable to think of myself as a me.

The last thing APM wanted was to put an amateur like me in a real mating situation. But as accidents go, this was a very happy one for APM. My mate, Gui Gui, was seen by APM as the next in line as a possible panda suitor, as APM’s other boars were still a little young and uneducated in matters of love. Gui Gui had been observing Avalon mounting sows for two seasons. It seems he learned all he needed, since he successfully deposited a healthy payload of sperm into Funicello.

Gui Gui will now join that elite group of boars whose sexual exploits are recorded in *The International Studbook of the Giant Panda*, a registry of every boar whose sperm has been used in procreation attempts. His sample will be divided into test tubes of 100,000 cells and sent to breeding facilities all over the world.

Moreover, three of APM’s five sows will enter estrus within the next few weeks. This could be the beginning of a wonderful career for him as a professional stud.

My helmet is unfastened screw by screw. I’m still panting, dazed. Suddenly my panda-head is halved, removed, and all that’s left of my mind is my own mind. In front of my face is Cooper, smiling like a dumbass.

“You did great,” he says. “You were perfect.”

“Always am,” I say sleepily. I’m not ready to lose my dream of being a panda yet. I’m resisting returning to the world. “And you missed it.”

“I was busy,” he says. And then, with mock modesty: “I got her.”

“Who?” I ask, blinking.

“The second terrorist. I caught her. And I didn’t even break anything on this one.”

“Good for you,” I say. But I don’t give two shits. Talking to Cooper is shrinking me. Sentence by sentence, noun by noun, he’s turning me back into Gabrielle Réal. But I don’t want to be Réal. Not yet. I want my body to be as large as my

imagination for a while longer.

And now Deeprashad is kneeling next to me. “You were glorious!” she says. But then she takes a paw in her hand. “But we need to talk seriously about your security. Unfortunately, you will now be on 22:19’s list. Since in their eyes you’ve...had relations with a real bear, that makes you a sinner. And therefore a target. But APM will – ”

“Anita?” says Xiadon. Cooper and Deeprashad part a little so I can see her behind them. “We can discuss that later, maybe?”

Anita wrangles the words back into her mouth. Then, tight-lipped, she says, “Sure thing, Mei,” pats my paw, backs off.

“You too, Ken.”

“What’d I do?” asks Cooper. He was trying to be funny, but it comes off a little strained. I notice his finger is ringless now. Does he take it off to jockey bears? Probably. God, I hope so.

When he delays, Xiadon gives him the take-a-hike thumb. Reluctantly, he winks at me and leaves my side. That just leaves me and the good doctor looking at each other.

“It’s beautiful, right?” Xiadon asks. “It’s hard to come back, I know. But it’s okay. Take all the time you need.”

And I’m giggling. Out of nowhere. And then crying, too: my patented giggle-cry, confusing and disturbing to watch, I’ve been told since I was a kid. But I can’t help it. I wasn’t just alive when I was a panda; I was in life, indistinguishable from life. Now I feel manacled by thought, self-awareness, words. Especially words. Language is the knothole in the fence: you’re grateful to be able to see through to the other side, sure, but wouldn’t it be better just to jump the fence?

Xiadon raises a hand as if she is going to wave hello, but instead she wiggles her panda thumb at me.

That little gesture snaps my crying jag. Now I’m just laughing. I lift the suit’s right paw and wiggle my own sesamoid bone at her. I’m at least that much still a panda.

Carlos Hernandez’s fiction draws from his Latino heritage, except when it doesn’t. He’s an English Professor at the City University of New York and a member of the SFWA. This is his third appearance in *Interzone*.

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Damien Walters Grintalis

Paskutinis Iluzija (The Last Illusion)

Andrius Kavalauskas, the last magician of Lithuania, closed the door and rested his head against the wood as the nurse's footsteps faded away. He smelled cabbage and pork cooking from the apartment across the hallway and knew that in a few hours he would find a plate of food sitting by his door. Daina was a good neighbor. A good friend.



He headed back into the tiny bedroom at the back of the apartment. Laurita was a still and silent shape beneath the threadbare blanket. Far too still.

He froze in place. Stared at the blanket. Heard neither breath nor whisper. *No, no. Not yet. Please, not yet*, he thought.

Then the blanket moved up and down. Laurita raised her head and smiled. He exhaled, the sound harsh in the quiet.

"Papa, was I a good girl for the nurse?"

"Of course you were. Miss Ruta said you were very good."

"She had a sad face. I thought..."

"No, no, you are always a good girl. Always."

"When I feel better, I should pick flowers for her. Would that be okay?"

Andrius's chest tightened. For a moment, the words caught in his throat. He nodded. "Yes, it would be very nice."

Outside the window, storm clouds gathered and thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Is Perkūnas angry?" Laurita asked.

He laughed. "Maybe he is."

She gave him a small smile. "Papa?"

"Yes?"

"Who makes the snow?"

He tapped his chin. "I wonder. Is it Perkūnas?"

She shook her head. "No, he makes the thunder."

"Jūratė?"

Another shake. A small giggle. "No, she lives in the sea."

"Ahhhhh, I know," he said, raising his hand. In his palm, a white ball of snow shimmered in the light. "I make the snow!" He tossed it up in the air. It broke apart and snowflakes fell down around her, alighting on her lashes and nose. The room filled with the smell of pine and cinnamon.

She gave a weak laugh, her breath emerging in a vapory plume. As the snowflakes melted, he could not help looking over both shoulders. No one could possibly have felt such a small magic, and the curtains were shut tight, but still...

"You have the best magic in the world," Laurita said.

He kissed her forehead. "I have the best daughter in the world, but now, you must go to sleep."

"Okay," she said, her eyes already half-closed.

He pretended not to notice the pale cast to her skin. The shadows beneath her eyes. Her frail limbs. The breath wheezing in and out of her lungs. Just as he pretended not to see the soldiers outside. It was

safer

better that way.

Andrius tossed and turned in his own bed, hating the way the space beside him felt like a country he could only dream of visiting. Wind rattled against the glass and a boom sounded in the distance. Maybe Perkūnas was wielding the bolts of thunder and lightning. Maybe not. He was also the god of war, yet he seemed in no hurry to strike down the invaders. Perhaps he didn't care at all.

The rest of the world was far too busy watching Paris fall to the Germans to worry about Andrius's country and the suffering of its people. There were whispers of ways out, of soldiers who would look the other way for the right amount of money, but he did not have the money, and Laurita was not strong enough for travel.

He scrubbed his face with his hands. A trace of magic lingered on his skin, giving his palm a luminescent appearance. Such a small thing. Such a huge risk. But it was all he had.

Saulė had always loved the snowflakes, too.

He rolled over to the empty side of the bed and buried his face in her pillow. He could still smell the scent of her skin. Tears burned in his eyes. He inhaled deeply, pulling in her scent as far as he could.

She would still be with them if he hadn't let her go out on her own. He'd known it was dangerous. But she'd smiled and said she'd be right back, she was only going to the market, and he'd kissed her on the cheek and said, "Okay." He should've said no, it was not okay. He was supposed to protect her.

He punched the mattress and sobbed into the pillow. It was all his fault and there was nothing he could do. He could only pray they took her to Siberia. At least there she would have a chance. A tiny one, but better than the alternative.

"Oh, Saulė, I miss you. I miss you so much," he said, his voice muffled. "Please forgive me."

He should've done something. *Anything*. He cried until his throat ached, then clasped his hands together and prayed. He prayed Ruta made it home safe and sound. He prayed for his country. He prayed for Saulė. And last, he prayed for a miracle for Laurita. He wished with all his heart she would see her seventh birthday. Surely the gods could grant him that.

Coughing woke him in the middle of the night. He stumbled in the darkness, banging his shin on the doorframe. Laurita was hunched over in the bed, her hands cupped over her mouth. The coughs came out ragged and thick. He rubbed her back and held a cloth to her mouth until the coughing subsided.

After he wiped the blood from her lips, he tucked the cloth away before she could see it and measured out a spoonful of the medicine Ruta, his wife's best friend in the time before fear and soldiers, had risked her life to bring. It was not a curative (those medicines belonged to other countries, countries without soldiers and tanks invading their lands) but would make it...easier for her.

Laurita made a face. "I don't like medicine."

"I don't either." He smiled. "Here, let's make it taste better." He waved his hand. The liquid turned amber; the sweet smell of flowers wafted from the spoon. She swallowed it down and smiled.

"Will the medicine help me get better?"

"Yes it will."

"And when I am well, will Mama come back?"

He swallowed hard and forced his lips into a smile. "I'm sure she will finish her work and come home soon."

A little lie. Just like the taste of honey in her spoon.

"I wish the soldiers could find someone else to help them. I miss her, Papa. I miss her so much."

"I miss her, too."

"Magic me a story, Papa."

"I wish I could, but you know it would make the soldiers angry. I will tell you a story instead."

"Okay."

"And what story do you want to hear?"

Her face brightened. "Jūratė and Kastytis."

He smiled. Saulė had told her the story time

and again. He always thought it too sad for a small child, but it was Laurita's favorite. He readjusted the curtains, fluffed Laurita's pillow, and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful mermaid goddess who lived under the sea in a palace made of amber. Her name was Jūratė and she had a long tail with scales the color of the sky just before the sun sets.

"And there was a handsome fisherman named Kastytis who would come to the sea every day to catch fish, but one day, while Kastytis was in his boat, Perkūnas was angry and made a big storm."

Andrius let a little magic slip free. Just a touch of the salt tang of the Baltic Sea and a darkening of the air near the ceiling to resemble a storm cloud.

"Kastytis fell into the sea. Jūratė saw him fall and rescued him from the waves. She took him home to her palace and they fell in love.

"But this made Perkūnas very angry. He didn't think Jūratė should love a mortal man like Kastytis. He wanted her to marry Patrimpas, the God of Water. In his anger, he sent a lightning bolt from the sky through the water."

Andrius made light flash in the air, one quick snap of soundless bright.

"The lightning hit Jūratė's palace, shattering it into thousands and thousands of fragments, and poor Kastytis was killed.

"Perkūnas punished Jūratė by chaining her to the ruins of her castle. And now, when storms strike the sea, you can hear Jūratė crying for Kastytis, and you can find her tears washed upon the shore."

He held out his hand and opened his fingers, revealing a tiny piece of amber. She took it and held it up to the light. It glowed with a secret fire then it winked out of sight. She put her hand down and looked at him for a long time without speaking, her mouth set into a frown, her eyes filled with a seriousness far too advanced for her years.

"Perkūnas should not have made the storm and the thunder. He should've protected the palace instead, and he should've left Jūratė and Kastytis alone."

"It's just a story, little one. Only a story."

But the frown did not leave her face.

"Papa, why does the magic make the soldiers angry?"

"I don't know," he lied.

From his bedroom window, Andrius could see the edge of a striped awning at the end of the street. A theater, its stage now silent and dark. He'd performed there a long time ago, but he could still remember the heat of the lights and the gasps of surprise from the audience.

The best magicians could make the people forget they were seated indoors. Could transport them to another time, another place. Lithuanian magic was no mere sleight of hand or game of misdirection, but a gift from the land, born from the spring breeze and the winter chill, the fir tree and the rivers.

It could create lions from shadows and birds from candle flame. Could send snowfall on a summer day and turn tears into rain. Even if you were not in a theater during a performance, you could stand outside and feel it in the air, a silent music pulsing from the magicians' fingertips. It was power, but not of control or destruction. It gave hope. Happiness. Strength. All the things the Russians wanted to take away.

Saulė had not wanted him to stop performing, but life on the stage belonged to a man without responsibilities. He'd traded the theater for small magics to make her smile and later, to calm their infant daughter. A choice he never regretted.

And if he had he not made that choice... He closed his eyes. He'd heard whispers that even the old magicians who'd lost their magic to disease or dementia had disappeared.

How he had escaped notice, he didn't know.

"I don't want to eat, Papa."

Andrius set the bowl down and smoothed her hair back from her forehead. "But you must. You need your strength."

She shook her head. "I will eat it later."

"But the rabbit might eat it first."

"The rabbit?"

"Yes, the rabbit."

He cupped his hands together, blew into them, and opened his palms. And there was a tiny brown rabbit, its nose wiggling, its ears twitching. He placed the rabbit on the bed. It hopped

once, twice, three times. Laurita giggled and clapped her hands.

"Can we keep him?"

"Only for a little while," he whispered.

He guided the rabbit over to Laurita's bowl. It dipped its head in.

"No, rabbit, that's my food."

"Okay, you eat it then."

She took several spoonfuls, watching the rabbit jump around on her bed. When the soup was gone, the rabbit turned translucent, shimmering at the edges. Then it disappeared.

"Can you bring it back?"

"No, it's too dangerous. I will tell you a story instead.

"Once upon a time, the Grand Duke Gediminas went on a hunting trip and made camp atop a high mountain. That night, he dreamt of an iron wolf on the mountain. The wolf howled and howled and howled and sounded like hundreds of wolves.

"When he woke, he told the priest of his dream. The priest said it meant that Gediminas was to build a city on the mountain. The city would be as strong as iron and stand tall for hundreds of years.

"Gediminas had his castle built and it still stands today, here in Vilnius."

He held out his hand. On his palm rested a miniature version of the circular castle, the striped flag of Lithuania flying strong and proud.

"I think you would build a better castle, Papa. A bigger, stronger one to keep everyone safe."

Andrius bent over the bed to adjust the blankets. "Everything will work out fine, little one. I'm sure of it."

He hoped his voice sounded convincing.

Andrius was sleeping in a chair in the front room when footsteps thudded in the hall. Coarse voices spoke in Russian. He sprang up from the chair and ran into Laurita's bedroom. She was sleeping soundly. He closed her bedroom door, his mouth dry, his palms sweaty.

His hands twisted. Maybe the soldiers would not check the rest of the apartment. He stood up straight, took a deep breath, and waited three feet away from the door.

Someone shouted. A soldier laughed. A wom-

an screamed. He covered his mouth with his hand and cast a gaze toward Laurita's door.

Please let her sleep through it, he thought.

More footsteps. Closer now.

Prašau, prašau.

He dropped his hands at his side. He would not let them see that he was afraid. A thump. Another laugh. A sob. A child's cries.

Prašau.

Then the footsteps led away. *Away.* His shoulders sagged. He could not hold in his tears.

"Ačiū Dievo," he whispered.

They were safe. This time.

"Papa?"

He rushed into the bedroom.

"I heard voices."

"It was just the neighbors. That's all. Go back to sleep now. Everything is fine."

"Okay."

He sagged against the doorframe. No more magic. It was too dangerous. And what good was it? All the magic in the world couldn't make her well again.

A soft knock sounded at the door just after the sun rose. Andrius opened it a crack, saw Daina standing in the hall, and ushered her in.

"They took Gedrius and his whole family," she whispered. "But I saw one of them visit Raimondas's apartment after they took them away."

"Raimondas? No, he wouldn't do something like that. He wouldn't. He is a good man."

"He is a scared man, like all of us and scared men do foolish things sometimes." She touched his arm. "You must be careful."

Andrius raked his fingers through his hair. "I am careful"

She took his hands and gave them a small shake. "No, you need to be *careful*. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good."

A sick feeling twisted inside his belly. "If something should happen to me, will you..." He cleared his throat. "Will you care for Laurita?"

She nodded slowly. "I will do what I can."

After she left, he stood in the doorway to Laurita's bedroom and watched her sleep. Her breath was too shallow; the movement of her chest, too

slight. Tears ran down his cheeks.

Daina must be mistaken. Raimondas would not turn anyone in. Maybe it was just coincidence. Gedrius's wife had been a pretty woman. The soldiers liked pretty women. He shuddered.

He should have made Saulė stay home. She had been beautiful.

Once, the small apartment had smelled of flowers, of Saulė's perfume. Of hope. Now only the scent of illness hung in the air. Andrius opened his hand and wisps of pale pink floated up. The smell of freshly cut roses danced in the air, but it was only a poor imitation. He closed his fist tight, and the scent vanished as if it had never been there at all.

Through a gap in the curtains, he saw a group of soldiers sauntering down the street, their boots trailing mud on the cobblestones. A small boy darted out of another apartment building. One of the soldiers grabbed his arm, and the rest laughed.

Andrius raised his fist to bang on the glass, but pulled it back before it struck. He turned away. The boy's high-pitched cries crept into the apartment. Andrius covered his ears and rocked back and forth. The boy was so small. So small. He wanted to help, but he couldn't. He *couldn't*. The cries went on and on.

Eventually they stopped and the soldiers marched on. Andrius dared another look, but the boy was nowhere to be seen.

Laurita was fast asleep, even though the sun was only beginning to set. She'd refused to eat anything all day, claiming her stomach hurt. He kissed her forehead, went into his own bedroom, and pretended to sleep.

"Please, Laurita, you must eat."

"But I'm not hungry now. Can I eat later? Please?"

He nodded. "Okay. Later."

She coughed softly. Once. Twice. The cough became loud and liquid and thick. He sat her up and held a cloth to her mouth while he rubbed her back. Her body shook with the force of each cough.

Finally, it subsided enough for a spoonful of medicine. She grimaced, but swallowed it all

down without complaint. He held her close, listening to the air rattle in her lungs. Smelled the coppery tinge of her breath.

I am sorry, Saulė, I did the best I could.

It wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

"Papa, will I be well soon?"

"Yes, very soon."

"Good. I am tired of being sick. I want to pick flowers."

She coughed again, weakly. Her skin was cool and clammy. He pressed a finger to her wrist; her pulse raced beneath, thready and inconsistent. Tears blurred his vision. He blinked them away and shoved his sorrow deep inside.

"Papa?"

"Yes?"

"I wish the soldiers would let Mama come back for a little while so I could tell her I love her."

His tears returned. This time, he turned his head and wiped his eyes dry.

"She knows you love her. I promise."

"But I want to tell her. It's not fair."

"No, it isn't fair. I wish they would let her come home, too." He sighed and looked down at his hands. None of it was fair. "But they told me I could magic you a story."

"They did?"

"Yes, just this one time, it was okay."

She struggled up to a sitting position. He rearranged the pillow behind her. His hands shook, but he touched her cheek. He had failed in so many ways. As a husband. As a father. As a man. He could give his daughter this much. It would not make up for what he didn't do, nothing could do that, but it was the only gift he knew how to give.

No matter the risk to himself.

"Once upon a time, there was a beautiful mermaid goddess who lived under the sea in a palace made of amber."

He lifted his hand and swept it through the air. The walls of the bedroom glistened and turned sapphire blue in color. Ripples moved in lazy lines up and down. At the edges, where ceiling met wall and wall met floor, white foam gathered. The distant cry of seabirds drifted in the air. The room filled with the scent of the sea.

A tiny shimmering light began to glow. It grew

larger and larger, revealing a palace with gilded spires.

"It's beautiful," Laurita whispered.

Multicolored fish swam in and out of the palace's many windows. Then Jūratė swam out of the front entrance, her dark hair flowing in the water. Her tail was covered with purple-blue scales, her fins tipped with gold. Laurita's eyes widened.

Andrius waved his hand again. The air around them changed color. First aquamarine, then sapphire, rippling around them in slow, gentle waves. Through the water above their heads, a man's face became visible. A young, handsome man holding a fishing rod in one hand and a fish in the other.

Jūratė swam closer to the surface. Kastytis leaned forward; his mouth formed a circle and he fell into the water with a splash. Droplets landed on Laurita's brow. Andrius wiped them away.

Jūratė pulled Kastytis into her arms and they spun around in the water. Tiny pink and yellow fish circled them, moving fast enough to create the illusion of ribbons.

Laurita smiled. "They are so happy."

Then a man with stormy eyes looked down through the water, his mouth set into a frown. In his hand, he held a bolt of lightning. He raised his arm.

"Papa, don't let him destroy the castle. Please!"

"But that's how the story goes."

"No, you can change the story, can't you?"

Andrius sucked in a breath. He gave his tears to the sea and tried to find a smile, but inside, his heart clenched tight. He nodded.

No matter the risk.

The magic stretched within him, filling his limbs with strength. He pushed it out, farther than he'd allowed in years. It made Laurita's skin shine, stripping the pallor of grey. She laughed, high and crystal clear.

The water rippled again. Perkūnas's frown disappeared into a smile. The amber palace gleamed. A fish swam close, its scales a brilliant crimson. Laurita reached out and touched its fin. It swam back around and let her touch it again. Jūratė let go of Kastytis and swam over to the bed. She offered Laurita a smile and her hand.

"Papa, is it okay?"

"Yes, I think it is."

The magic grew and grew. Jūratė took Andrius's hand as well and tugged them down into the water, toward the castle.

"Can we go in?" Laurita whispered.

Jūratė nodded. She swam between them as they walked up the amber steps into a room with an arched ceiling. The floor was a circular mosaic of amber in varying shades. The walls, thin sheets of amber the color of honey fresh from the comb.

"Papa, it's the most beautiful thing ever."

Footsteps thumped in the hall, and his heart-beat quickened.

Not yet. Please, not yet.

"I love you, my princess."

Voices rose in anger. Andrius looked over his shoulder. Through the magic, he could just make out the bedroom door.

"Papa?"

"Everything is okay," he said, forcing his voice to remain steady.

"Is it the soldiers?"

"Yes."

"But they said you could magic me a story, and it's not finished yet."

"I guess they changed their minds. I think they need me to go work with them for a little while."

Jūratė let go of Andrius's hand, but kept Laurita's.

Andrius bent down in front of Laurita and brushed her hair back from her face. "But while I go and work with the soldiers, how would you like to stay here?"

"Could I?"

He looked up at Jūratė. She nodded.

"See?"

"You won't be gone a long time like Mama will you?"

Jūratė leaned close, her voice soft and whispery like sea foam. "I will keep her safe."

A fist banged on the door. He wrapped his arms around Laurita and kissed her cheeks.

"I don't want you to go," she said, her eyes filled with tears.

"I have to, my sweet girl, I have to, but I will see you soon. I promise."

"I love you, Papa."

"And I love you."

With a knot in his chest, Andrius bowed his head. The smell of the sea vanished. The sound of the waves receded. And Laurita was gone. The pillow still held the shape of her head; the sheets, her body, but atop the blanket was a single piece of amber in the shape of a tear.

His last, and best, illusion.

He scooped it up and held it to his chest, rocking back and forth. Tears spilled down his cheeks. He held the tiny piece of magic tight and did not let go, not even when the barrel of a gun was pressed against his temple.

Damien Walters Grintalis lives in the US with her husband and two rescued pit bulls. Her short fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Strange Horizons*, *Apex Magazine*, *Lightspeed*, and others, and her debut novel, *Ink*, was released in December 2012 by Samhain Horror. You can visit her website, damienwaltersgrintalis.com, or follow her on Twitter @dwgrintalis.



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the FACE TREE

ANTONY MANN

ILLUSTRATED BY MARTIN HANFORD

It was spring, the time of new growth, and the leaves on the trees were pushing out from the axils, tight rolls of green waiting to unfurl. Davison had stopped at The Prince of Wales on his way back from the city, sitting on his own in the corner, reading the paper and glancing at the crossword while he sipped on his pint and let the quiet soak into him. It had been another crappy morning. Business was slow. He was getting so little money now from the walking tours that soon he would be forced back into teaching English to the foreigners. Something was keeping the tourists away. Maybe it was the downturn, or maybe it was just him.



But the beer had lifted his spirits – or else had dulled his senses enough so that, temporarily at least, he didn't give a damn. Sod the tourists. It wasn't as though he didn't despise them, didn't resent their holiday faces and remorseless cheerfulness and all that disposable cash they brought with them which went not into his pocket but instead into the tills in the cheap souvenir shops on Cornmarket. Already as he crossed The Slade and turned up the path beside the culvert the sun felt warmer on his back, his step on the path lighter. He began to think about the day ahead. His house needed a clean, there was no doubt about that. And it *was* spring. But maybe he would leave that for another season.

He cut through to the Old Road, taking the hill west over the A34 to Shotover. Suddenly, almost before he knew it, he was out of suburbia and on the edge of the wild wood. Behind him, the spires of Oxford that he knew so well were obscured by trees. The road had taken him up, narrowing and turning to mud, opening out then into a grassy, enclosed field. He went through a small car park crisscrossed with bike tracks – deserted but for a lone Renault with a Greenpeace sticker on the bumper – then through a wooden gate. Following the path down and left, immediately he was in the green forest.

It was cooler here. He could feel his head clearing, as though with every step the shade of the trees and the quiet and the damp soil underfoot was painting him a new picture of what his life was. He wasn't a part of the city after all, not the stink or the rush or the clamouring, stupid faces of the people. He was himself, alone, but happy in that, here where he could smell the rich, slow decay of the leaf mould and hear the call of the thrush and the snipe. Overhead, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye as squirrels darted from branch to branch. He felt his breathing slow and his face and shoulders relax as moment by moment he sank into an altered state, a different appreciation of who he might be.

It was all illusion, of course, and he knew that. Soon enough he would be back in Oxford, scratching for a living, getting drunk when he could afford it, spending the desultory evenings in loud pubs with his few friends and acquaint-

ances as they complained about their unsatisfactory lives.

But in the meantime, this was his place.

His immersion in his solitude was almost complete – and then he heard the voices up ahead. Children. Shouting and laughing, or, as it seemed to him, trying to outdo each other in screeching, as though their very identities depended on it. It annoyed him. He had thought he might find a couple of kids down in the valley where the stream ran – they sometimes congregated there to make dams and play in the mud in their wellies – but up here he had hoped for some peace and quiet.

Rounding a bend in the track, he saw them. There were three of them, all boys aged about twelve, congregated around an oak tree. Three pushbikes lay tangled on the ground nearby.

The oak was a fine specimen, forty or fifty feet tall, its canopy of translucent green arching over a spread of lichen-covered branches. The three boys were hitting the trunk with sticks, yelling as they did so. He thought they must be assaulting some hapless forest animal which had hidden somewhere on the tree, punishing it for daring to exist. As he drew closer, however, he saw more clearly the target of their aggression.

Three or four feet off the ground, a bulbous and wrinkled knot the size of a dinner plate protruded from the trunk. They were hitting the tree, that was all. It was harmless fun, but nonetheless, Davison was irritated. The boys had disturbed his walk. He was about to give them a blast and send them on their way when he saw the woman.

She was running down the track from the opposite direction, arms waving, a look of anger on her face.

"Hey!" she was shouting. "Get away from that tree! Get away now!"

At first Davison thought she might be the mother, of one of them at least, but no – the kids had gone straight for their bikes and were already fleeing up the track towards him, hurling typical twelve-year-old abuse behind. Davison wasn't even sure that they'd seen him, and for a moment he was tempted to stick out an arm and knock one of the brats off their bike to the ground. Then, thinking better of it, he stepped

out of the way, watching as they hurtled past.

"Watch out you old idiot!" cried one, and then they were gone, whooping and laughing as they disappeared among the trees.

Old idiot? But he was only forty-two.

"I know where you live!" Davison called after them. "I'm going to come round tonight while you're sleeping and kill your pets!"

He chuckled to himself as he walked up to where the woman crouched examining the tree. Her anger seemed to have evaporated.

"That pet thing, it always get them," he said.

"It does?" she said, preoccupied.

"The pets, you know, they freak out..." he repeated, tailing off lamely.

"Oh yes? Well I guess they would."

She got to her feet, reluctantly he thought, and found a smile. She must have been in her early thirties. She was thin, and had dark wavy hair. She was not really very pretty at all, but she was interesting to look at, somehow intense and contained. She dressed like she lived in East Oxford, with a hint of modern hippy in her old stained jeans and patchwork woollen jacket.

"Well..." she said at last.

She didn't want him to be there, he picked up on that straight away, but he didn't care. It was his forest too. If she didn't like it, then she could leave. Nobody was stopping her.

"I'm Stephen. Stephen Davison," he said. "I'm down in Florence Park."

"You are?"

"Yes. I live there. You local then?"

"More or less," she said.

"You know, it's funny, but in a way, I don't recognise this part of the woods, when I know that I should."

"Well that's the problem, isn't it?" she replied. "The foresters have been in and done clearing. Until recently, this path wasn't used at all and everything was all right."

He saw then that it was true. He had probably walked past this thicket a hundred times, never even seeing the oak – but now, the thicket was no more, and the tree was exposed.

She stood half in front of the trunk, unconsciously obscuring it, as though there was something there that she hoped he might not see. Naturally, he saw it at once.

"What on earth is that?" he said. "Is that a face?"

"Oh, yes?" said the woman, not looking at the tree at all.

"It is! It's a face!"

Davison had never seen anything like it. It wasn't a knot at all, not as he had thought. Three or four feet off the ground, there *was* a face, jutting out from the trunk. It was of a man. Arising from the bark of the tree itself, it bulged out just as a knot might. It was as though there had been the stub of a thick branch there, and someone had come with a knife and a gouge and fashioned the likeness out of the living tree, then gone away and let the bark grow back over.

"What is that? Is that natural?" said Davison. "How odd!"

"Yes, I don't know," said the woman.

"Maybe it's some kind of art. Like they have in that place wherever it is, with all the sculptures in the woods, you know?"

"Yes, that's it," said the woman, suddenly smiling again.

"What do you mean, that's it?" Davison frowned.

"It's a sculpture. You know, I did it."

"Really?"

"As part of a commission. For the local council. I'm just here looking after it. Chasing the kids off. Though of course that won't work forever. I can't be here twenty-four seven." As she spoke, she looked at the tree.

"This was you?"

"That's right." She turned back to Davison. "Do you like it?"

"Well, it's very clever," Davison conceded. It was not possible to tell exactly how old the representation was supposed to be, but he guess relatively young – between twenty-five and thirty, at any rate. The face had well-defined eyes – though they were closed. There was a nose, and a mouth. The hair, the ears and the chin all grew back into the trunk, merging with the tree itself.

"So you're an artist?"

"That's right."

"What's your name?"

"My name? Well, it's Sarah. Sarah Middleton. It's 'el', not 'le', it's unusual. You won't have heard

of me, though. I'm only just starting out with my art."

"So why did you do it in a thicket?" he asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"You said the foresters had just been through. So you did the sculpture where no-one would see it."

"It's better that way. To protect it, you see?"

He shrugged. "Art is art, I guess," he said.

"I think so."

"Well you've started out pretty well if this is what you can achieve," Davison said.

"Thank you," said the woman. "Stephen, was it?"

They walked back to Oxford together. Though Sarah didn't seem to want to speak much, it was companionable enough, and by the time they reached the Cowley Road, Davison was beginning to feel as though they were developing a rapport of sorts. He had always been crap with women, either too clumsily aggressive or too awkwardly standoffish. He had never managed to find that middle ground of easy parlance which he assumed was the key. Sure, there had been relationships, but they had always been fitful, uncomfortable, self-fulfillingly doomed.

It was coming on evening now. They had turned into Hurst Street, walking past the old silver birch on the corner. It was the biggest tree for half a mile. Davison had known it for years, watched its slow deterioration. Now it was for the chop, its trunk wreathed in yellow council safety ribbons, a portent of things to come. The old brick terraces here were squashed together, somehow fashionable with their tiny herb and flower gardens under wood-frame windows. People painted their doors purple. It was bicycle territory, with narrow roads where parking was a nightmare.

A couple of cyclists pedaled by, young men in their late teens. Davison glanced their way with distaste. They were students – as he had once been. They seemed complacently self-assured, wearing expressions that told flatly of expectation and privilege. But whereas they had it all in front of them – whatever the well-connected future which beckoned them on – for him it was

all behind. He was lumped with the past, that was it, along with the disappointment at how he had screwed things up and ended up where he was. How *had* he fucked it all up so badly? That was the tragedy. He had no idea. That was the trouble with years. They passed, and before you knew it, you were where you were, and there was sod all you could do about.

"Well, this is me," said Sarah, breaking into his train of thought.

"Oh, sorry," said Davison, stuttering to life again. He had been forced to lie to her, fabricating an errand in Cowley in order to accompany her and find out where she lived. Now they stood in front of the door to Number Forty-Seven, suffering through an awkward moment of goodbye.

She turned the key in the lock and paused for a moment on the step. He caught a glimpse of the hallway beyond, earthen colours and bare polished floorboards, the hint of a musty smell.

"Thanks for walking with me."

"I was going this way anyway," he said. "I'll watch out for your work."

"My work?"

She seemed confused.

"Let me know if you tackle any more trees. There's a few horse chestnuts in Florence Park could do with a makeover."

"Oh, yes," she said. "I will."

"You ought to keep it up," he blurted thickly. "You might have a future."

"I hope so," she smiled. "Well, I might see you again."

For a second, he looked at the closing door, then turned away, grimacing. Why did he always have to ruin everything with inane comments? *You ought to keep it up. You might have a future.* What a fool. On the other hand, she had said that she might see him again. That was better than nothing, wasn't it? Even if it had *meant* nothing.

He walked on, thirsty now, found a pub which hadn't been overrun by yammering students and settled in for the duration. The hours went by quickly. There was a quiz, and he made up a team of one and won second prize. The team which came first had been cheating on their smart phones, but that was how it was these days, there was nothing you could do.

He stayed until closing time, boring the landlord, whom he knew slightly, with a series of jaundiced observations about the teenage wildlife of Oxford. Afterwards, by now drunk, he began his walk up the Cowley Road, stopping for a chicken madras at an Indian restaurant which had been about to close, but which stayed open solely for him due to the inherent politeness of the owners. He shovelled the food down his throat and gave them a small tip, then walked out the door – straight into a large, incoherent group which had just spilled into the street from The Bodley Arms. There was a band playing somewhere inside. Davison could hear the music bleeding through the walls, throbbing bass underneath a mangle of tinny guitars.

He must have been drunker than he thought, because he staggered right into one of the girls, clumsily putting his hands all over her as he tried to right himself.

"Sorry," he grunted, even as a part of him thought how pleasant it had been to cop a feel. He wondered vaguely if it counted as a sexual experience.

They were a punkish lot, mostly teenagers, with a couple of older and not any wiser heads among them. A few of them laughed and made idiotic comments. Not the girl, though, a lipstick blonde who simply told him to fuck off and pushed him away like he was diseased. A thin guy in black stovepipes lunged forward into Davison's face.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?" the kid said.

"Nothing," Davison slurred. "What do you think I'm doing?"

That had always been his downfall – a few drinks, and he could never keep his trap shut.

"I think you're molesting my girlfriend!" the scrawny youth spat. "Jeez, you got so close you were almost fucking her!"

"Well, it is a permissive society," shrugged Davison helplessly.

It was typical. He'd been minding his own business, and now he was going to get his head beaten in. Through no fault of his own he had ended up caught in a cliché of testosterone and booze-fuelled aggression. But, to his surprise, nothing happened. He was saved, he assumed,

by the fact that none of them knew what 'permissive' meant. If they had, no doubt he would have ended the night in the gutter with a broken rib or worse, but as it was the girl had already grabbed her boyfriend by the arm. She yanked him away after the rest of them as they drifted towards the city and their next appointment with alcohol and unbearably loud music.

"I'll remember you!" the boyfriend shouted as the girl dragged him off.

"No doubt," Davison muttered.

Next time, maybe he ought to just call the girl a slut and be done with it.

He made his way back to his place in Florence Park.

In the morning, he looked her up on the internet. Sarah Middleton.

There was nothing.

He took to walking home past her place. Instead of catching the bus as he usually did, when he had grown sick of showing the tourists through the Bodleian and the less stultifying of the colleges, he would take his meagre earnings and buy some lunch, then walk down The High, over the Magdalen Bridge and up the Iffley Road. From there he would turn off into the narrow streets of East Oxford.

It was seventeen days before he saw her again. It was perfect really. Not only had walking all the extra miles led to him shedding a few kilos, but it had been so long, he had all but forgotten why he was going that way in the first place. When he did walk past her door, he didn't even notice as it opened.

"Stephen?"

Davison looked up in surprise. "Oh, hello!" he said.

Sarah came down the step and out onto the footpath. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, nothing," he said, almost truthfully. "I'm on the way home."

"You look good." She paused. "Have you lost some weight?"

"Maybe a little."

"It suits you."

"Thanks."

"I...I can walk with you for a while? I'm meeting someone, but not for half an hour."

Meeting someone? What did that mean? A bloke, no doubt. He was too late, if he had ever been in time in the first place. He had not been bold or assertive enough, had left it all to chance, and someone had gotten in before him. He should have *knocked* on her door instead of walking past it sixteen times. Even then, what chance would he have had? None.

He mentally slapped himself. Snap out of it, you fool. The constant stream of negative thinking was doing his head in.

"You...ah...done any more sculptures?" he asked her.

They had been heading east down Cricket Road, walking almost aimlessly. Now, at Florence Park, they turned in at the gate.

"Not really," she said. "I can't just do them. I need inspiration."

"Well you know the great masters, they didn't wait for inspiration," he said. Taking the walking tours, he had learned a lot about great and dusty art. The colleges were full of it. "To them it was a job. If they got a commission, they had to do it to put food on the table whether they felt like it or not."

"That's not like me," she said, not taking it personally. "If I'm not inspired, I can do nothing. But don't worry. I get inspired quite often."

They were walking along the avenue of chestnuts. The trees were come now into full leaf and lent the park a certain grandeur. They were as old as the park itself, seventy years at least, providing a heavy, impenetrable shade in summer, and in winter, the bare architectural beauty of their species. It was a weekday, and the place was deserted except for a young mother feeding her baby on the grass, fifty yards away.

Sarah walked up to one of the old trees and put her hand against the trunk.

"Come here," she said. "You can put your hand on mine."

He hesitated, then approached and did as she had asked. He couldn't remember the last time his skin had been against that of a woman. Maybe that hooker in Tenerife, the one who had tried to make him wear a condom. But that had been a hooker. This was a proper woman – that he had met and was somehow getting to know. The back of her hand felt cool and warm

at the same time. He felt a tingle of something pleasant. Immediately, he thought of sex. With a conscious effort, he put the idea out of his mind.

"You feel that?" she asked.

"Well I don't know," he said. "What am I..."

"The tree. You feel it?"

So she was a kooky tree-hugger type person. He should have guessed from the sculpture in the woods and her hippy-style clothes. That was okay. It was something he could work with. The tree, was it? Fair enough. He put it against the bark, but she shook her head, taking it and placing it back on her own.

"No, you won't get it like that," she said. "Close your eyes."

He did as he was told.

The strange thing was, with his eyes shut and the world blocked out, he did get it, though he had no idea what it was. It had such an effect on him that later that day, he went home and began writing a poem about it. He hadn't written verse in over ten years, not seriously.

He described it in that poem as a rustle of leaves which started somewhere at the back of his mind, evolving ever so slowly into the sense of a soothing sway of branches overhead, moved by a breeze which, crazily, seemed to be inside *him*. It didn't make any sense. Then, he became conscious of...an *awareness*...that was the only word that he could find for it. It was alien, outside of his experience – it would have been too much to call it a *mind* – it was more like a purposeful impulse towards life that he instinctively knew was guided not by thoughts, but by a deep inner serenity and lack of care.

He felt this presence coursing into his body through his fingertips, and for a moment, experienced that serenity, and loved it passively, and wanted it to last – or rather, he intuited that it *would* last, forever, an eternity in the moment, day and night, sun and cloud, wind and water all the same, and he was content with that. Then, somewhere outside of himself, something beeped, and jarringly, the spell was broken.

He blinked himself back into the harsh glare of the day.

"Sorry," Sarah was saying, phone in hand. Her voice jarred in his ears. "I should take this. Hello...?"

He turned from her, peripherally aware of her conversation. He placed his hand flat against the tree again. Nothing. Whatever it had been, whatever the feeling, it was gone.

"Well that's a shame," Sarah said. She put her phone back in her shoulder bag and turned to Davison. "My friend can't make it after all. So I'm at a loose end."

"What was that?" he asked. For some reason he had started to tremble.

"My friend can't..."

"No, what was *that*?" He nodded at the tree.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, was that real? What was it?"

"That? Oh, don't worry about that. That was nothing. Do you fancy going for a coffee?"

Three days later, Sarah rang him. She rang *him*. Though he had been harbouring the hope, still it surprised him. She had asked for his number at the cafe, and had followed through now with an actual phone call. They arranged to go on a picnic that weekend. She wanted to explore near Minster Lovell, she said. The weather looked like being all right.

He had thought a lot about what had happened in Florence Park. It was some kind of strange infatuation, he guessed, triggered by their physical contact. Though it had never happened to him before, he had heard about it, the state of not really knowing how much you wanted someone until there was a catalyst which revealed your true feelings. To put it tritely, he had seen it on television. All that tree stuff was rubbish of course, but *she*, now she was very elusive, hard to pin down. He had read about it somewhere – in Jung, probably. She was the sort of ethereal person who naturally tended to be intensely loved or admired, who attracted that sort of attention. It was easier to project onto them, apparently. Gobbledygook, most likely, but there may have been something in it.

And he had gotten a half-decent poem out of it. He had had a few published back in the day, some of them not bad. Now that he was feeling inspired, he might try again.

Minster Lovell was in west Oxfordshire, near Witney. The village, on the River Windrush, was

well-known locally for the ruin of Minster Lovell Hall. Davison had been there before, he was certain, though he couldn't remember exactly when. No doubt he had dragged a load of tourists out there in a minibus some time. He thought the ruins might be a nice place for the picnic. The Hall had been built around 1440 by William Lovell. It was an impressive structure – what was left of it – right there on the water, surrounded by well-kept meadow. Sarah, though, was keen to venture into the woods. There was a forested acreage called Maggots Grove, she said, that she had always wanted to see.

"Sounds like something out of Lord of the Rings," said Davison. "A short cut to mushrooms, is it?"

"Mushrooms?" she said, distractedly.

She had said hardly a word in her Renault, though he had tried to make conversation. He was feeling excited, keyed up. Was he going to get some sex on a blanket somewhere under the sky, brambles up his arse and ants in his hair? Probably not, but at least there was an outside chance, which was better than usual. Just seeing her, smelling her, was making him horny. If he didn't get laid, he would explode.

"Farmer Maggot, you know? Frodo used to steal mushrooms from him when he was a kid," he said, realising as he did so how much of a nerd he sounded. "Not that I'm a *huge* fan of Tolkien. Everyone reads it when they're, you know...kids. It's only when you're older that you realise what a load of..."

"Do you want me?" she said suddenly, interrupting.

"Sorry?"

"I can never tell what people think of me, that's all. I'm not very good at reading them."

They had left the village and taken the path north through a field of wildflowers. The Windrush was on their left, a pretty, sunken stream that you could hardly see even though you were ten feet from it. Up ahead, a half mile away, he could see where the woodland began.

Did he want her? It was an unfair question, he thought. What was he supposed to do now? Weren't his feelings obvious enough as it was? Did he have to confess to them as well, place all the power in her hands, leave himself open to yet

another boot print in the face?

But then she said, "Because, well, I like *you*, Stephen. You've had some hard times in your life, I can see that in you. I think over the years you've put up a lot of defences, to protect yourself. But underneath it, you have good heart."

She stopped then, and touched him on the arm, looking into his eyes. Suddenly, he could hardly control himself. It was almost frightening, the strength with which it took him. He dropped the picnic basket and took her in his arms, grabbing her, forcing his tongue into her mouth, grinding his lips against her own. She tried to respond, but then spluttered, pushing him away, laughing.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"You're a terrible kisser!"

"Sorry." No-one had ever said that to him before, though to be fair, there hadn't been many had the chance to say it.

"You need to be gentle. I can show you. Come on, let's go have something to eat."

She led them some distance into the wood. She seemed to know the way. It reminded Davison a little of Shotover. The canopies of the trees were densely interwoven overhead. Starved of the sun, the undergrowth was stunted and sparse, the paths wide and bare. There were clearings, though, grassy and light, and she laid out their blanket at the edge of one of these, right against the trunk of an old beech. There was no-one else around.

Though he had packed a generous basket of food, sandwiches and crisps and dips, Davison could hardly taste a thing. The champagne, he did taste – briefly – gulping down two full glasses almost before the cork had hit the ground. He sat avidly watching her. Waiting for her to *show* him, as she had promised. But Sarah was suddenly chatty, talking about this and that, which he found a little annoying, as though their kiss – even though he had botched it – hadn't happened at all. There was a spark in her eyes. Something had brought her to life. She was glowing with a vitality that he hadn't seen in her before.

"This will be a good place," she was saying, not really talking to him at all, her eyes darting

brightly from tree to tree. "Not many come here, and most of those are good souls. There is safety here, and it is a forest that I love."

An uneasiness pricked at him then.

"What, you've been here before?" he said.

"Yes, I've been here," she said.

"I thought you said that you were looking *forward* to exploring it."

She hardly missed a beat. "There's always more to discover in a place like this, don't you think?"

"Well, it's pleasant," he agreed.

"You may come to love it."

"I may do. But I should tell you, if you hadn't guessed it already, I'm not one of those nature boy types. I don't want to disappoint you, but I'm more your suburban..."

Without warning, she leaned forward, shutting him up. She was kissing him again, at last, and as she touched him, his misgivings were forgotten.

"Like this," she said, pushing him back onto the grass, straddling him, leaning down and taking his face gently in her hands. She teased at his lips with her tongue, pressing her own lips onto his. He tasted chalkiness, a kind of earthy sensation that he had not expected at all, but the feeling that came with it was delightful. He was transported at once back to Florence Park, his hand upon hers against the tree.

This time, however, it was more intense, as though his whole body was suddenly immersed in green, like sunlight glowing in the veins of a leaf. He felt a need to have her which would not be stopped, reached up to grab her breasts, couldn't find them – where the hell were they? – then felt a hand on his groin. It was heavier somehow than he'd imagined it, yet flexible, long fingers undoing his zipper, curling in past his thigh. He dared not open his eyes, for some reason afraid of what he might see. Instead he let himself go, taken by the flow, losing himself in the depths.

Then, just as it seemed that he would disappear forever into the ecstasy, something yanked at him, dragging him back against his will. Voices, laughing and shouting. He opened his eyes to see Sarah rolling off him, adjusting her clothes, her face turned away, her hair unaccountably wild and straw-like. He sat up, confused. Then he saw

them. Across the clearing, watching through the trees, were two boys aged about fourteen.

"Sorry, were we interrupting something?" one of them jeered.

"Jesus lady, what's the deal with that smelly old prick?" said the other. "I could give you a better time than him and his wrinkled cock!"

These kids, didn't any of them know how to keep their bloody traps shut? When they realised what they had stumbled upon – couldn't they have just walked quietly on, respecting his and Sarah's privacy? Had a giggle about it later amongst their friends? No, they had to stick their oar in, laugh and mock, have their fun. Davison felt the red mist fall, and this time he embraced it. Before he knew what he was doing, he was on his feet, ignoring Sarah's hand as she pulled at his trouser leg.

"Leave them, Stephen, please," she was saying, but he brushed her away. He was already striding towards the boys. They must have read it in his face, the intensity of his anger, because they hesitated.

"Let's go," one said to the other.

"Yes, you'd better run," said Davison, still walking. His voice was cold but purposed. "You'd better start now."

They ran, and he ran after. At first, the boys were laughing as he chased them, turning as they went and giving him the finger, cupping their hands and making the cocksucker sign. They were young and quick, they thought, and there was no way that the old fart could keep up with them through these woods that they knew so well.

But Davison did keep up. Fuelled by his rage, that these little pricks had barged into his life and stomped all over it, he found a determination which spurred him on. At first the path they took led them deeper into the woods. The trees were taller, older, the canopy high above them. Davison could hear Sarah's cries behind him, but soon they faded, and then there was nothing except the sound of his own breathing and his feet pounding the dark earth. Branches slapped against his cheeks, but he brushed them away, feeling nothing. He blundered on, aware that his body was beginning to protest, his ankle and knee joints arguing plaintively for him to stop.

But he rode on his exhilaration, ignoring the pain.

He had the boys in his sights as they ran on ahead, keeping the distance, neither pulling away nor falling back. They had stopped laughing now. Instead they glanced over their shoulders as they went, running silently, marking his position. The brash mockery on their faces had given way to fear. It gratified him. No doubt all they had expected from him was bluster and indignation. They hadn't foreseen this, a chase through the forest with no end in sight. He visualised what he would do to them when he caught them – he was certain now that he would. He gained strength from it, the idea of taking one and ramming his skinny arm up behind his back, hurling him face forward into the dirt. Perhaps that would be going too far, but perhaps it wouldn't. He would have to wait and see how it went when he got hold of one of the little bastards.

But then, they emerged from the woods. It happened suddenly. One moment they were in the trees, careening past a stand of oak and birch, the next, the path had ended in a stile. The boys jumped over effortlessly, like they had done a thousand times before, and disappeared through a gap in a hedgerow. Lumbering up behind, Davison clambered over and found himself in a narrow laneway, tall blackthorn on either side.

The boys were already disappearing around a corner, and their renewed laughter affirmed to him what he already knew. Now that he had stopped, his body had had enough. Half-heartedly, he jogged after the little brats, but the adrenalin had gone. Every step now was pain. His knees ached and his lungs burned. He coughed up a chunk of phlegm out of his dry throat. He was beginning to feel foolish.

Rounding the bend, the hedge on his left gave way to a white picket fence. Behind it was a neat garden and a lopsided old house from god knew when, two storeys of asymmetry which had somehow survived the centuries and begun to look pretty in the process. There were more houses up ahead on both sides. It was all very attractive and considered and intentional. He was in some sodding village out in the middle of nowhere.

Beyond the white fence, a man was emerging from the house. He was younger than Davison by a decade, taller, and fitter. He looked strong and stupid, Davison thought, like he had worked years in a physical trade. Behind him, Davison could see the two boys, smirking in the hallway. It had all turned out fine for them after all. In fact, their afternoon's entertainment was about to continue. The man caught sight of Davison and strode purposefully to the boundary of his property, then through the gate and out into the middle of the lane.

Davison didn't move. He was in the road too, twenty feet from the man. They faced each other like it was some kind of ridiculous gunfight without the guns.

"Are you the one?" the man said, feeling compelled to raise his voice even though he didn't need to.

"I might be," said Davison mildly. "The one what?"

"These lads said someone was chasing them through the woods." He nodded back towards the house, where the boys were still sniggering in the doorway. "Is that true?"

"Perhaps you ought to ask them," Davison said.

"Ask them what? They already fucking told me."

"Then why are you asking me?"

"Because before I punch someone in the fucking face I like to make sure they deserve it," said the man.

"Very considerate of you," Davison muttered. His picnic had turned into a disaster. Not only had he not gotten laid, he was about to get his head caved in by this petty thug. "Look," he said, more or less accepting his fate, "I appreciate your misguided protective instincts and the loyalty that you're showing towards these brats. But before you do punch me in the fucking face, could I ask that you avoid my front teeth? It's damned hard to get on an NHS dentist list these days and I can't afford to go private. I mean, realistically, who can?"

"Right," said the man, striding forward. "That's it."

"Thought it might be," said Davison.

There was no point in fighting back, and he

was too bugged to run. Davison braced himself. Maybe if he just stood and took it like a coward then it would be over quicker. He glanced over to where the two boys stood laughing in the doorway. One of them had a smart phone and was recording the whole thing. Oh great, thought Davison. Youtube'd for posterity by a couple of little pricks.

A car came around the corner then, quite fast, so that the man had to leap out of the way. It was Sarah's Renault. She stopped right beside Davison. He didn't need to be asked. He got in the passenger side door, though it was with some difficulty that he slid into the seat. He winced. His knees were fucked, he could tell. That was going to be fun, walking the tourist hordes around Oxford the next couple of days, hobbling from college to college. They drove off with the man still watching from outside his gate. Davison could see his twisted face in the wing mirror, his mouth moving, heard vaguely the shouted abuse.

He turned to Sarah. She was staring straight ahead, a dark look on her face.

"You ran off," she said coldly.

"Sorry about that," Davison said.

"Why did you do that?"

"I don't know. Those kids, they really got to me. I shouldn't have, I know, but I couldn't help it."

"You've ruined it."

"Sorry." He hesitated, then said, "We could go back to your place."

"That isn't going to happen."

"No," he said, staring out the window. "No, I guess not."

It was gone one a.m. by the time Davison staggered out into the street. He would have stayed longer, stayed all night, but the landlord of The Duke of Cornwall had finally tossed him out and shut his doors. He stood for a moment in the Cornmarket, letting it wash over him, that feeling of pent-up violence which seemed to be everywhere in Oxford these days, after dark at least. It was worst here in the centre of town of course. With its seedy meat-market clubs and late bars, this was their weekend Mecca, the bored, drunken yobs and tarts, the drug-addled

ratbags that swarmed in from Barton and Blackbird Leys, fresh from their Xboxes, all up for a shag or a fight or both, vomit and blood on the streets, broken teeth in the gutters, a good night out all round.

It suited his mood, this bleak determinism. What did it all amount to anyway? Stuck in a crap job which paid peanuts, living on his own in a dead-end town, surrounded by the detritus of humanity. Not to mention, he had screwed things up royally with Sarah. She had made him feel like...like he had never felt before. More importantly, she had been *nice* to him. She had listened, and laughed, and how long had it been since anyone had done that? To put it bluntly, she had been his door into another world. That door had been ajar for a brief moment before, typically, uselessly, he had slammed it shut in his own face.

He saw them coming then, down the wide pedestrian way, past the Boots and the HMV and the Burger King. There were about ten of them, all aged between sixteen and twenty-five, girls and boys, cat-calling and singing and shouting, some of them mock fighting as they came, all drunk or high or both, their faces shiny with sweat under the yellow street lights.

He could have stepped away, back into the shadows, made himself invisible, but he chose not to. Some perverse instinct towards self-destruction took hold, and instead of getting the hell out of there as any sane person would, he walked slowly out into the middle of the street. Even then, they might have ignored him and gone past, but he turned to face them as they approached and met the gaze of their leader.

"Oh right," Davison muttered. It was Mr Cowley Road, the one who a few nights previously had accused him of molesting his girlfriend. The skank was there too, talking to one of her brainless friends. What had been the bloke's parting shot? *I'll remember you*. Clearly, from the vacant look on his face, that had been an idle threat.

In fact, to his surprise, the whole gang was ignoring him, letting him be. Maybe they were just too tired or pissed to want to kick in someone's ribs tonight. Just not in the mood. Davison decided to see about that.

"Your bint girlfriend," he said clearly as the skinny dickhead walked past. "How much for a shag?"

"You what?" The guy stopped and stared at Davison in amazement. The rest of the mob stopped too, already moving to surround him, hem him in.

"The blonde skank," Davison went on, nodding towards the girlfriend, who was looking at him oddly. Did *she* recognise him? "She reminds me of a whore I screwed a few times. Are you the pimp? How much for straight sex? Can we do it in a doorway?"

The skinny guy looked around, glancing at his mates, momentarily confused. Was this some kind of elaborate set-up, prelude to an ambush? Was there by any chance a gang of old drunks hiding behind the bins and the benches, waiting to stagger out and mutter at them incoherently, maybe breathe all over them? Solidarity among inveterate pissheads, perhaps? All working together for the common cause of dissolution and despair.

The unpleasant runt had regained his focus.

"You are fucking dead," he said – somewhat redundantly, Davison thought.

"Agreed," Davison nodded, grunting as the first punch caught him in the gut.

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The rest of it was a blur. The shouts and the laughter, the pain of the blows raining down from all directions, the panicky feeling of suffocation, mercifully quick as he blacked out. Waking somewhere still night with the taste of blood in his mouth, one eye not opening properly. The jab of agony in his ribcage as he tried to get up, the dampness in his trousers, the smell of his own urine. His knees still hurting as he staggered away from a shop window, soulless manikins watching him as he went. More wetness, drizzle on the Cornmarket, the paving stones reflecting storefront lights. Then, a vehicle. Flashing lights and a siren. The intimidating blue uniforms. And that smell. What, did all fucking coppers use the same washing powder?

"Oh, look who it is!"

A hand on his shoulder, shoving him towards the van.

"Someone's really had a go here, haven't they?"

"I think I need a doctor," said Davison feebly, slurring through a split lip.

"What was that? You need a doctor? You hear that? This time he needs a doctor."

Harsh laughter. Then, unexpectedly, a kinder voice breaking in.

"Tell you what. If you can remember your address, we'll take you home. Let you sleep it off in your own bed. Look at him, poor bastard."

"Forty-Seven," he said without thinking. "Forty-Seven Hurst Street."

He knew he shouldn't be doing this, told himself he couldn't help it. Drunk and bloodied, stinking like the street, banging on her door at four in the morning. It was the worst possible idea. But that had been his life, hadn't it? Lining up his choices, taking all the bad ones. Why quit now?

At last the door opened and she stood in the doorway. Deflected moonlight shone through a window somewhere out back, revealing her slim body in silhouette through a gauzy nightgown. She stared at him for a long moment, then spoke.

"What has happened to you?"

"Nothing," he said flatly. "Nothing out of the ordinary, anyway."

"What do you want?"

"I need this," he said. "More than you could ever know."

She hesitated.

"This isn't the time, or the place. I like you, Stephen, but go home. Sleep. Call me tomorrow. Please. We can go back to the woods."

"No," he said. He pushed his way in, grabbing her as he did so, half guiding, half forcing her back down the hallway into her own home.

"We should go to the forest," she said again. "Now if you like. I'll drive. Just, don't."

But he did. He guessed the bedroom was on the second floor, it always was in these places. He found the stairs in the dark, feeling his way, shepherding her on ahead. She didn't struggle, and he doubted she'd ring the cops. He knew that he was destroying their relationship, whatever there was left of it – which had been next to nothing anyway. But even if she didn't owe him this, then certainly *life* did, for all the crap he had been through in the past and would have to go through in the future.

On the second floor, she hesitated in front of a door, and he guessed it was her room. There was an earthy, dewy smell up here, like a garden bed in the morning.

"All right," she said, matter-of-factly. "If you want this."

He nodded, pushed the door open. The smell was stronger in here, bringing pictures to his mind – a thistle meadow after rain, butterflies on the wild flowers, worms slow-turning in the soil. It was dark. The curtains were thick. He looked for the bed, couldn't seem to find it. Where was the bloody light switch? He was still drunk, and his head was starting to hurt.

"Here," she said, taking his hands and guiding him down. He knew it should be onto a mattress, or carpet, or floorboards, but crazily, it felt like the ground. How could his hands be sinking into soil? He felt the coolness of moist earth beneath him through his clothes, then, she had straddled him, and there it was again, the odd leathery touch of her lips and tongue in his mouth, the long, slender fingers releasing his belt and the flies of his trousers.

"I...I'm not sure about this," he said, but knew even as he did so that it was too late. There was a power and resilience above him that he had no hope of resisting. It felt like she was anchored to the floor, as though her knees and feet had taken root.

"I wanted a forest for you, but you said not. I wanted the sun and the wind and the seasons, but you said not." Her voice sounded different, neither happy nor sad, but deeper in timbre, more mellifluous. "Now, hush."

He felt tendrils moving beneath him in the soil, smelled her breath like rainwater, caught a glint of green from leaf-shaped eyes, and then, he was inside her, moving with the sap. He saw it all at once, or rather, felt it, *knew* it, those lines he had written, brought to life again in this bitter act of love and lust. He saw the seed – *was* the seed – picked up by the breeze and taken, landing by chance on clear soil, watered by the rain, nurtured by the sun. Fragile roots reached down into the dark earth, seeking nutrients, as the first seedleaf unfurled into the air, growing up twig by branch, unmoving but always in motion, unaware but knowing, not happy, not sad, just being.

And as the tree grew, it took hold of his consciousness from within, moulding it into a new form. He knew then that he was dissolving – the himself that he thought of as Stephen Davison – taking on a different shape – and he knew also that this was the last thing that he *would* ever know, in the sense that he was accustomed to. In the human sense. And at the very end of himself, it surprised him that he could let go so easily, in gratitude and relief, bid farewell to all the smells and sights and sounds, and the feelings – the pain and regret, the doubt and the guilt and the self-hatred, as though all those things were no more than chaff on the wind, carried away forever. And then, as those two lucent green eyes looked down upon him, as she took his seed and gave back something that could not be understood, he was gone.

There were eight or ten of them, gathered near the old silver birch on the corner – kids on bikes, an elderly couple walking an elderly dog, Asian youths in hoodies and tracksuit bottoms. There was a woman, too. She must have been in her early thirties. Thin, with dark wavy hair, she was not really very pretty at all, but she was interesting to look at, somehow intense and contained. She dressed like she lived locally, in East Oxford, in old stained jeans and a colourful woollen jacket.

"There's a face in the tree," the old woman was saying.

"Don't be stupid!" said one of the Asians. "It's a fucking knot, you dim bitch."

"What, are you joking?" said one of his mates. "It's a face! What, you think a knot just grew out of the tree last night?"

"Who knows when it was there?" the first boy said. "How does a face get in a tree?"

There was a face, jutting out of the trunk, not far from the ground. The yellow plastic council ribbons had partly obscured it, but someone had pulled them to one side. The face was of a man, possibly in his forties. It was made from the bark, and bulged out just as a knot might, but it was definitely a face. It was as though there had been the stub of a thick branch there, and someone had come with a knife and a gouge and sculpted the likeness out of the living tree, and

then gone away and let the bark grow back over.

"It's Jesus Christ," said the old woman, at which point the old man beside her raised his eyebrows, then took her gently by the arm and began to lead her away.

"Jesus Christ?" said one of the Asians. "Are you fucking kidding me you mad old bitch? What would fucking Jesus be doing round here? Stopping by for a chicken tikka?"

His mates laughed. The younger woman had bent down to the face, was stroking it gently.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "You could have had a forest under the sun and the stars."

"You can't talk to it, lady," said one of the youths. "You know why? Because it's a fucking tree. They don't have great hearing."

His mates laughed again.

A small council truck had pulled up and two men in overalls were getting out. One went round back and unlocked the gate, clambering up and taking a chainsaw from a workbox on the tray. The other began to rip the yellow plastic ribbons from the tree, hardly even glancing at the face.

The small crowd was already beginning to drift off. The old couple had already gone, and the rest followed, going their separate ways. The Asian youths sauntered off towards Cowley Road.

"About time they cut that fucking tree down," one of them was saying. "Fucking danger to the public."

The younger woman went the other way, not looking back. Only the kids on bikes stayed, watching while the man with the chainsaw fired it up and began to cut the lowermost branches from the tree.

Antony Mann's fiction has appeared many times in *Interzone* and its sister magazines *Crimewave* (including the forthcoming *CW12*, with 'The Simpson Frames'), *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative* (now *Black Static*), plus *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and other places. He has new eBook out, *Candy Moments*, from Really Blue Books. It's a collection of his horror and sci-fi stories, published over the years in such places as *Interzone*. It makes a companion piece to *Milo & I*, a collection of his crime fiction, also published by Really Blue. Lately Antony has also been writing electronic music. For more, check out his website at antonymann.com.

PRAISE FOR MIKE O'DRISCOLL'S EYEPENNIES

"A musician emotionally scarred by a near-death experience is haunted by his past, his present and his future in this chilling, slow burn of a ghost story. Read it!" **Ellen Datlow**

"Mike O'Driscoll is without doubt one of our best writers. I often wish he wrote more, because when he does produce something new – such as the excellent *Eyepennies* – it's truly an occasion for celebration" **Tim Lebbon**

"A musician struggles to come to terms with his existence following a near-death experience, in a world where reality is something elusive and the darkness is always waiting. A beautifully written, evocative novella" **Alison Littlewood**

"A beautiful story suffused with the entangled mysteries of pain and life, as radiant as it is dark: the best kind" **Stephen Volk**

"Full of symbols and dread, a Cotard's delusion set to O'Driscoll's cool bluesy prose, *Eyepennies* makes a refined contribution to the TTA Press canon" **Paul Meloy**

"An oblique yet beautifully written story that slowly builds a number of emotional layers. O'Driscoll's story reflects music, life and, of course, fear. The launch of the TTA Novella series is off to a very strong start with this daring yet emotionally grounded piece of writing that will linger in the brain of the reader like a haunting Sparklehorse melody" **Dan Howarth, This is Horror**

"The author lures us in with vivid imagery. He draws us further with non-linear, chaotic sequences that mirror Mark's inner journey. Mr O'Driscoll ensures that we are along for the wild ride by putting us in Mark's head and letting us experience the creepy surrealism of his life" **Cyd Athens, Tangent Online**

"This is classic psychological horror, and it's beautifully written. The prose is a dream, and rolls poetically off the page into images and metaphors that O'Driscoll paints effortlessly and with such clarity that even the abstract nature of the subject matter cannot cloud" **Matthew S. Dent**

"A novella crackling with raw power, this manages to be incredibly realistic whilst embracing hints of the supernatural, a story of the darkness for readers who want more to their horror than blood and gore. Well

written, thoroughly gripping. I highly recommend this" **Mark West**

"Like many of the great supernatural stories the reader is left wondering whether what you are reading is real or if it is just a figment of Mark's broken mind. This is a brilliant story that pushed me as a reader, as much with its clever writing and beautiful prose as it did with some shocking scenes" **Jim McLeod, Ginger Nuts of Horror**

"A fine, insightful piece of psychological horror, *Eyepennies* is an effective showcase of Mike O'Driscoll's famous storytelling ability and enticing prose. Highly recommended to anyone who prefers classy dark fiction rather than gory horror" **Mario Guslandi**

"The prose is effortless and compelling, creating images in the mind's eye both chilling and insightful. The pace is brilliant, you don't realise that you are being drawn in and carried along until you reach a satisfying and haunting end" **Sean P. Chatterton**

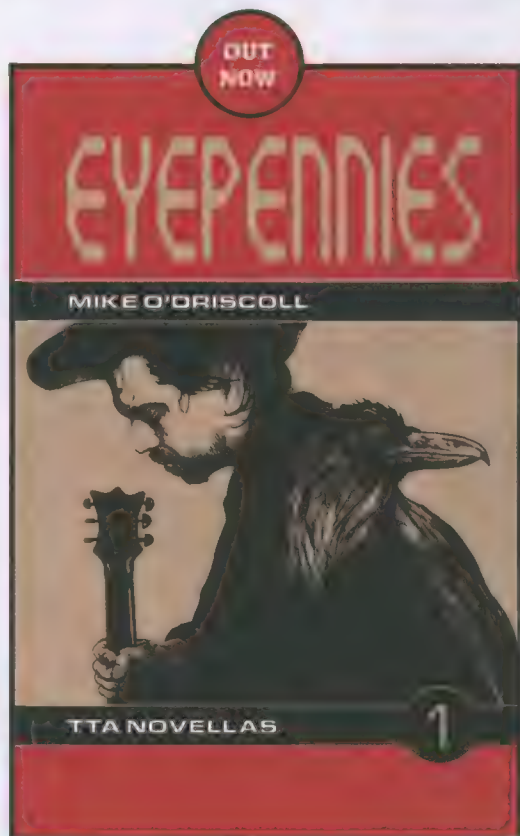
"This had many unsettling images and some truly horrifying scenes. The theme of pennies on the eyes (to pay your passage to the next world) is used effectively. This is a good start to the TTA Novellas series and I will be looking forward to future tales. I highly recommend this one" **Sam Tomaino, SF Revu**

"*Eyepennies* is a fine portrait of a person under psychological strain. O'Driscoll maintains the ambiguity over whether Mark's experiences are supernatural or delusional in origin (and, indeed, over whether that makes any practical difference). The novella's fragmented structure (reaching back into different periods of the protagonist's life) further underlines the diffuse state of Mark's mind. This is a good start for the novella series, and I look forward to future instalments" **David Hebblethwaite**

"O'Driscoll has written a tightly-constructed and sympathetic homage to a doomed artist where one man's memory, dreams and timeline overlap to mind-bendingly nightmarish effect. If you like horror that is a bit out of left field, this will be right up your alley" **Alan Kelly, Rue Morgue**

"Incredibly haunting, emotional, and at times outright chilling. One night of particularly disturbed sleep bears testament to the strength of O'Driscoll's imagery" **Dread Central**

TTA NOVELLAS



wraparound cover art by Rik Rawling



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3: Cold Turkey by Carole Johnstone (39,000 words)

4: The Teardrop Method by Simon Avery (26,000 words)

5: Country Dark by James Cooper (41,000 words)

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BOOK ZONE

LONDON FALLING

Paul Cornell

plus author interview

THE FOLLY OF THE WORLD

Jesse Bullington

AEROSF

edited by Ivor W. Hartmann

THE VORR

B. Catling

JOHN BRUNNER

Jad Smith

THE GRIM COMPANY

Luke Scull

THE TWYNING

Terence Blacker

THE HOOK

Daniel O'Malley

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THE ALCHEMY PRESS BOOK OF PULP HEROES

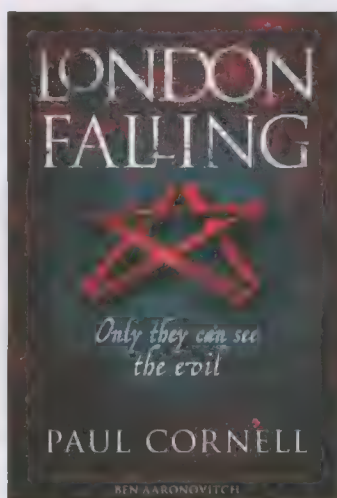
edited by Mike Chinn

THE MAD SCIENTIST'S DAUGHTER

Cassandra Rose Clarke

OUTLAW BODIES

edited by Lori Selke & Djibril al-Ayad



LONDON FALLING

Paul Cornell

Tor tpb, 402pp, £12.99

Paul F. Cockburn

The crime writer Meg Gardiner was not the first to suggest that the basic appeal of crime fiction is its “morality: finding justice, restoring order out of chaos”. After all, violence and murder are the most disruptive, upsetting forces imaginable in our lives, so no matter how some crime fiction authors might tinge their work with shades of grey, recognising the wider societal picture in the name of realism, their fundamental narrative thrust remains the solving of the crime, the identification – and, most importantly, the punishment – of its perpetrator.

So imagine twisting that chaos dial up to 11, thrusting detectives into a world where the crime and the criminal are – to all intents and purposes – supernatural. That’s what Paul Cornell does with *London Falling*, the first in a line of police procedural novels set in an increasingly occult, neo-Gothic London. As expected, the motivation of the main characters is to restore order out of chaos, but it comes with a twist: mysteriously given “the Sight” that enables

them to see a world of ghosts memories invisible to the rest of us, the small police investigation team at the heart of the book have no sure sense of the kind of order they want to restore.

And so they rely on the crutch of procedures. “We know her MO, and we’ve already worked her background,” says Detective Inspector James Quill about their criminal target, who has lived for centuries, kills without mercy and has an interesting relationship with physical space. “We have that tiny advantage: we can do proper police work on her. While we were working on that board, it felt as if we were also working to stop her – and that made me feel better.”

When we first meet him Quill is a tough, no airs and graces copper, a Sweeney-style policeman determined (and not just because he’s under official pressure) to nail London’s top crime boss Rob Toshack, even if doing so means sacrificing two undercover officers, Costain and Sefton. So, on New Year’s Eve 2011, the die is cast, the Metropolitan Police sweep down on Toshack’s little empire, and bring the man and his goons in. To Quill’s surprise, Toshack is willing to tell all, but before he can begin to outline how he built up his criminal empire, he’s killed in a manner that is both gruesome and frankly impossible. As becomes clear, Toshack had some friends in very low places, successfully building up his criminal network with the assistance of Mora Losley, a centuries old “witch” who has, among other traits, a murderous love of West Ham Football Club.

To his surprise, Quill is put on the investigation of Toshack’s murder, with a small team consisting of Costain, Sefton and intelligence analyst Lisa Ross. To say they are not a happy bunch is an understatement: despite having been in the same operation, Costain and Sefton have little love for each

other, while Ross comes with her own personal bias towards a case she had previously been kept remote from. Early on, there's a sense that Cornell is trying just that little bit too hard while setting things up; as if he hopes that, by making the team and its individual members so dysfunctional, so troubled by their pasts and current profession, that he'll automatically benefit from a stronger narrative tension as the reader wonders if the Operation Toto team will sufficiently overcome their differences and personal demons in order to get on with the job of bringing this particular witch down.

Because of this, the novel takes some time to catch flight, but once it does Cornell's writing is sharp, light and succinct, expertly encapsulating characters, relationships and some quite interesting ideas in a few chosen lines of dialogue or a deceptively simple turn of phrase. Admittedly, there are several occasions when he relies on chapter-long info-dumps on particular characters' background stories – indeed, in one delightfully brazen example the information comes from the mouth of “something that's halfway between evidence and a witness”. As a result, although the book constantly leaps between Quill, Costain, Sefton and Ross as point of view characters, there's always that lingering sense of there being a fifth team member, an authorial voice that's perhaps a little more noticeable than it should be.

And yet, it generally works. As a result, Cornell has successfully taken possession of an occult London that's altogether tougher and sharper than Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, and far less fanciful than China Miéville's *Kraken* and *Un Lun Dun*, or Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London*. Here's hoping any sequels don't squander the benefits of such strong foundations.

CAPITAL LETTERS

PAUL CORNELL interviewed by PAUL F. COCKBURN



Many of your previous novels have been grounded in decidedly rural environments, or have been set within relatively small villages or towns, so what inspired you to write a novel set in – and, in a sense, very much about – a conurbation as large and varied as London?

I realised that I'd been orbiting it all my life, and that I was fascinated by the use of space in it. There's something extraordinary

about how you can actually feel in some particular places where one cultural tectonic plate meets another. This series of books are about how population density and the adaptation of cities to their inhabitants creates something tangible. Civic planning equals magic!

Given the UK capital's current popularity among fantasy writers – most notably China Miéville

(*Kraken* and *Un Lun Dun*) and Ben Aaronovitch (*Rivers of London*), which also focuses on a small Metropolitan Police team dealing with magic and the supernatural – were you at all worried about finding a style and voice that was sufficiently distinct to make this particular London your own?

Actually, no, because these books are me getting back to writing in my natural, offhand voice, the voice I naively used in my *Doctor Who* books, decades ago, and have rather abandoned to artifice since. This is me just writing. And it feels great. And, perhaps unsurprisingly, to an outside observer anyway, they've done better than anything else I've done. There's clear blue water between the approaches of me and Ben, but honestly that's just accidental. I'm relieved there is, though.

Why do you think you stopped using that “natural, offhand voice”? Were you deliberately stepping away from your *Doctor Who* and *Bernice Summerfield* novels, or was it simply because of the books you wanted to write at the time?

I think some of it was an overreaction on my part, thinking that I couldn't be good enough to write a “proper novel”, so I had to change somehow. And some of it was that the markets I was pursuing needed different voices. I feel like I've wasted decades.

I think my favourite lines in the novel are “You only get one question, so don't waste it on physics”, and the main characters' frequent refrain of “We don't do theology”. In the novel you seem to be playing with ideas about how belief and memory can shape our perceptions of the physical world around us. Why does this area interest you? I think there is a dimension of

perception to the physical world, that the “psychosocial hypothesis” (as it's called in UFO circles) is valid for a lot of things. I'm actually a sceptic (with a c) about much that's called supernatural, but I also believe in a lot of impossible things. At least I believe they can happen sometimes. I've had some rather Dickian (or, indeed, Dickish) contact experiences, and I feel that insisting upon four dimensions, of the many available and unseen to us, as the entire world is a case of us humans



“This is me just writing. And it feels great”

protesting too much. I prefer to frame all of this in the language of physics, because I feel that's our best walking stick, but I also do religion. And a bit of Wicca at weekends.

Although undoubtedly brutal – violent things happen to many characters in the book – I felt that the strongest, most visceral scare came from the idea of there being someone not just “stealing away” children – and killing

them, horribly – but also capable of ensuring that their parents didn't even remember that they had had children. As a relatively recent father yourself, is that the worst thing you could imagine happening to you now?

I've imagined a lot of terrible things in the same general area. I wrote the first book before I was a parent, but the hormonal (and actually physical) changes of being a parent also rewire your brain, so harm to children is now an urgent thing, a call to action. (US TV drama makes so much sense now I have a family!)

Although Detective Inspector Quill is white, male and hitting middle age, the other main characters making up investigative team Operation Toto are diverse in terms of their gender, ethnic and social backgrounds and sexual orientation. How deliberate was that on your part?

Utterly deliberate. You can't just leave a book out at night and have gay men grow in the pages like mustard and cress. You have to *choose* to have anyone who's not white, straight, etc, in there, because those conditions are still the unconscious default. I think all this “they just happen to be gay...” are weasel words for “shut up shut up shut up!” I don't “just happen to be” straight, it's a major part of my life, it's a part of what defines me, and I think that's the case for all orientations. And “my characters just happened to be” anything is ridiculous. I wrote this, I chose how everything was. I think authors should stop trying to apologise for deliberately choosing diversity. “They're not there in a gratuitous way”: I have no idea what that means. What would the opposite of that actually be like? How does one put anything in a novel in a gratuitous way, unless one's admitting to writing a terrible book?

In the acknowledgements you mention that the main characters were first created for a possible TV series, but that their story had “changed out of all recognition”. Are you happier with how they are now, and that at last they’re out there in the world? Yes, hugely. I’m tremendously satisfied with this book. I rather regret mentioning the TV series actually, because it’s led to a few reviewers thinking they can detect that in the pages. But no, that’s just how I write novels. The characters are like five (yes, five) parts of who I am, so their voices feel natural to me, and I feel I can always use that little orchestra to tell any story I want to tell. That’s a great pleasure.

Do you worry that your novels are viewed unfairly because of your work in other fields, most notably television and comics? A little, I think. I hope that’ll go away. I think sometimes people just need to find something clever to say, and that’s an easy line.

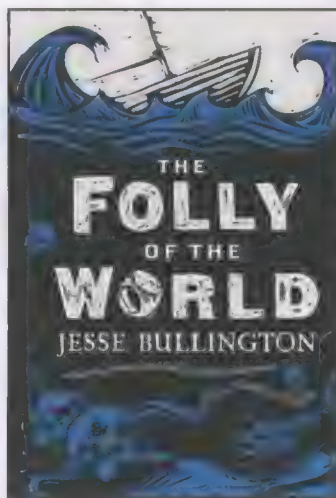
No spoilers, but the epilogue clearly suggests potential for a sequel, perhaps many. Are you hopeful of that?

Absolutely. I’m about a week away from sending in the sequel, and I hope to make an ongoing series (with one case solved in every book), like a long running crime series, with the backstory getting gradually revealed, a bit more every time. I hope also to have years in which I can release non-series books, because I’ve got one of those in dry dock as well.

Have you a confirmed title yet for the next book, and the series as a whole?

The series as a whole is called *Shadow Police*. The working title for the second book is *Hell is for Londoners*.

www.paulcornell.com



THE FOLLY OF THE WORLD
Jesse Bullington
Orbit pb, 502pp, £8.99

Peter Lofus

It is 1422 and Holland is still reeling from the Saint Elizabeth Flood, a deluge that inundated the region between Dordrecht and Geertruidenberg, killing thousands and turning the once populous region into a desolate inland sea. Onto this stage comes a trio of hapless adventurers – the lusty Sander Himbrecht, always quick to gouge an eye or crush a testicle, the wild Jolanda who swims like a fish and curses like a sailor, and the charming con artist Jan whose conspiracy draws them all together in an uneasy union against a life of desperation and poverty. Somewhere in the murky waters lies a treasure that can elevate count’s bastard Jan to a life of wealth and privilege, if only Jo can retrieve it. After that it is just a case of each member of the fellowship surviving the depredations and betrayals of the others.

The Folly of the World has a feel that will be instantly recognisable to readers of Bullington’s other novels. It is a vulgar, violent and frequently gruesome piece of work that revels in its own obscenity

and presents a darkly humorous, picaresque narrative that has scant regard for the well-being or sanity of its protagonists. But then, it is this delightfully grim world-building and characterisation that appeals most in Bullington’s novels. The level of depravity to which the characters sink is comedic in its complete lack of redemption, and the reader is pulled in like a rubbernecker at an accident. The descriptions of the waterlogged lowlands are picture perfect, creating an evocative and compelling stage upon which the drama unfolds in intimately researched detail.

The Folly of the World contains fewer fantastical and magical realist elements than its predecessors, which is a pity, as it is in some of those episodes that Bullington’s tremendous imagination best gets to flex its muscles. As the novel progresses, readers may struggle to find a subtext to reassure them that this isn’t merely a slab of grisly entertainment, and that all of the bodily fluids ejaculated and spilled aren’t purely gratuitous and lacking in any symbolic significance. This failing, coupled with the immense level of detail in later portions of the book and the unhurried approach to pacing, means that less patient readers may find the last two-thirds of the novel a challenge. As with *Grossbart*, *The Folly of the World* contains a section where the characters’ fortunes change somewhat as they enjoy a period of relative prosperity, and readers may find their interest waning.

Those who persevere, however, will find that the plot does eventually wind its way around to a satisfying resolution in the form of a shocking revelation that allows the author to tie up all the loose ends in a neat but bloody bow. It’s as good an introduction to Jesse Bullington as any, and a continuation of form for those already on board.



AFROSF

edited by Ivor W. Hartmann

StoryTime Kindle, 363pp, £6.41

Maureen Kincaid Speller

AfroSF – that is, SF written by African writers – has already attracted a considerable amount of enthusiastic attention from the Anglo-American SF community. Along with other critics, I welcome its publication. However, I wonder if *AfroSF* is quite what it seems to be. When editor Ivor W. Hartmann says that “SciFi is the only genre that enables African writers to envision a future from *our* African perspective” for whom does he speak? Of the twenty-two contributors, twelve are South African, while seven are Nigerian in origin, with single contributors from Zimbabwe, Kenya, and The Gambia. Africa, on the other hand, comprises fifty-four countries, nine territories, and three *de facto* states. This may imply that African SF flourishes only in some regions, or it may indicate that Hartmann was more successful in promoting the anthology in some areas. His introduction hints that as a continent Africa has a rich history of SF but he says too that “SciFi...is highly underdeveloped in African literature as a

whole”. What does this mean? As Hartmann eschews any form of historical overview, it is difficult to determine what the “Afro” in “AfroSF” stands for. Without a frame of reference it is hard to contextualise these stories though it is perhaps a good thing to come to them without preconceptions. Except that, given I read them from the point of view of a white female Anglo-American SF reader, my perception is inevitably shaped by my own cultural expectations.

In his introduction, Hartmann explains that “the vision I had for *AfroSF* needed to include the forward thinking spirit embodied so well in SciFi as a genre” and goes on to say “If you can’t see and relay an understandable vision of the future, your future will be co-opted by someone else’s vision, one that will not necessarily have your best interests at heart”. This suggests that, for Hartmann as editor, it is the idea that is important, and he has acknowledged this elsewhere.

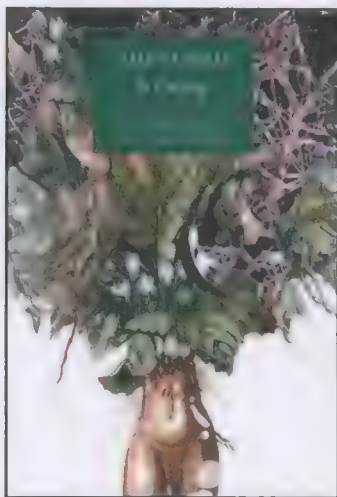
In practice this means a number of things. There are stories which, to the Anglo-American eye, seem to employ familiar tropes, most notably involving insanely automated bureaucracy, the fear of losing one’s identity, of no longer being able to participate fully in a capitalist society, or else focusing on the frustrations of maintaining one’s position, often through corruption. However, given the viewpoint from which they’re written, they can’t be dismissed as “tired”. Ashley Jacobs’ ‘New Mzansi’ draws attention to the difficulties of getting medical treatment while Tendai Huchu’s protagonist finds himself ensnared in colonial bureaucracy as he tries to protest against a land sale. Similarly, Sally-Ann Murray’s ‘Terms and Conditions Apply’ examines the problematic relationship between pharmaceutical companies and emerging nations. The narrative tricks of cyberpunk resurface in

Efe Okogu’s ‘Proposition 23’, yet this story of AIs seeking autonomy in the face of a repressive regime works extremely well.

War is rarely far from the agenda here. Clifton Gachagua’s ‘To Gaze At the Sun’ prompts us to think about the role of the artificial human in a new way as he describes a society in which couples adopt young men in order to have the pride of sending them away to the war. Biram Mboob’s ‘The Rare Earth’ in which Gideon, who leads a militia army, is apparently directed by God, but seems also to have a remarkable arsenal at his command. Mboob skilfully juxtaposes the viewpoint of those who see Gideon as a magician with those who better understand his resources.

Other stories deal with the relationship between traditional and modern ways, most notably Chiagozie Fred Nwonwu’s ‘Masquerade Stories’ which presents an initiation ceremony, which seems also to be based on an alien encounter, through the viewpoints of young men with traditional and modern attitudes, and their various responses to the situation. Intriguing too is Rafeeat Aliyu’s ‘Ofel’, her first published story. It is rough round the edges; nonetheless, the combination of ultra-modern detective story and casual recognition of traditional powers is a refreshing counterpoint to modern urban fantasy. Of the more overtly SF stories, Tade Thompson’s ‘Notes from Gethsemane’ is a well-wrought piece, successfully mixing gang culture, a run-down suburb and an alien entity, while Cristy Zinn’s ‘Five Sets of Hands’ explores interracial slavery and cooperation.

As to whether this is the defining anthology of AfroSF, I remain doubtful. However, it is undoubtedly a useful introduction to SF writing from Africa and contains some excellent stories.



THE VORRH

B. Catling

Honest Publishing hb, 512pp, £24.99

Andy Hedgecock

The Vorrh is a forest imagined in *Impressions of Africa* (1910) by Raymond Roussel, the French writer who inspired both the untrammelled imaginings of the Surrealists and constrained experiments of the Oulipo group. And the Vorrh is a forest re-imagined by sculptor, poet, academic, performance artist and novelist Brian Catling.

Roussel appears as a character in Catling's novel. Dismissed by contemporaries as a digressive writer obsessed with processes of imagination at the expense of emotional impact and coherence, he is now seen as a visionary master of literary derangement, an oneiric prophet and a bringer of imaginative redemption through archetypes of myth and dream. Catling, once known for his supporting role as "sculptor S.L. Joblard" in novels by Iain Sinclair, is similarly feted as a gnostic and shamanic artist. Sinclair described Catling as a modern Virgil, a witness and guide for a new dark age in which imagination is under assault from forces of repression

and commodification.

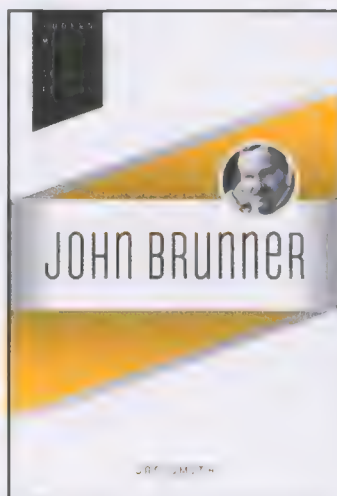
There's a clear link between Catling's visual and kinetic work and his literary excursion into the Vorrh, the horrors of which burn their way into the cortex. It's a place of psychic instability, concealment, feverish dreams and fractured identity. Monstrous beings, transgressive magic and atrocious rituals are described in dense, poetic prose. The dark and unknowable forest may well be a metaphor with its roots firmly planted – forgive the pun – in the work of Freud, Jung and the psychoanalysts. For nineteenth century explorers, the expression "the dark continent" meant sub-Saharan Africa; for Sigmund Freud, it signified occluded depths of female sexuality. Abuse of colonial power and the psychological ascendancy of sexuality are key themes for Catling. Obsessive quests, strange rituals and the imperatives of sex create physical control and hegemony of ideas. Characters and artefacts are drawn to the Vorrh: it may be a metaphor for imagination, but there are other readings. Like Catling's novel it is essentially unknowable: no two readers will experience the same trip into its dark heart. The symbolically charged set pieces slightly overshadow appreciation of character and motivation, but this 500 page odyssey is crammed with extraordinary presences.

There's Tsungali, the native hunter-assassin; Ishmael, an adolescent Cyclops, nurtured in a basement by Bakelite simulacra; and the alarming Ghertrude, Ishmael's lover and carer. The Bowman, initially the most enigmatic of Catling's nameless narrators, is introduced through a traumatising description of carving and stringing a bow from the organs of his recently deceased lover. The Bowman's identity is an emergent property of the narrative, so I'll say no more.

Some characters are re-imagined historical obsessives. Sarah Winchester, heiress to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company fortune, sees relentless extension of her home as apotropaic magic against haunting. Eadweard Muybridge, the nineteenth century photographic pioneer has energies that feed both homicidal jealousy and a fanatical ambition to capture the movement of people and animals using his "Zoopraxiscope". Sir William Withey Gull, Ripper suspect and Queen Victoria's surgeon, coins the term *Anorexia Nervosa*. And, of course, there's self-destructive genius Raymond Roussel, obsessive explorer and psychic topographer. But the most powerfully drawn character is the Vorrh itself, a vast landlocked forest with monstrous cannibals, bizarre microclimates and mysterious amnesiac power.

This apparently messy flux of imaginings is really a system of carefully crafted and interlinked symbols. The obsessive monocular gaze of Ishmael is mirrored in the cyclopean eyes of the lenses Muybridge uses to capture truth through a series of frozen stills. It also reflects Catling's quest to revivify imagination through a sequence of fractured narratives and vivid, dreamlike encounters. Then there are the bows and guns whose use creates ripples across time, place and consciousness.

The Vorrh contains elements of steampunk, gothic horror, quest-based fantasy, alternative history and surreal nightmare. It even reclaims the African adventure story from traditional imperialist trappings. It plays with these literary traditions while refusing to be bound by their tropes, techniques or audience expectations. To suggest it calls for a redefinition of fantasy is excessive, but this idiosyncratic and strange story can recharge the most jaded of imaginations. Dare to visit the Vorrh.



JOHN BRUNNER

Jad Smith

University of Illinois Press pb, 196pp, \$21.95

Stephen Theaker

Sarah Pinborough said recently that “Anyone who thinks any writer, bestseller or on the breadline, writes for the money, is a fool”, but it would be equally foolish to think money has no effect on what they write – and especially on what we get to see of their work. This book on John Brunner, who gave up scholarships and well-paying jobs to concentrate on writing but frequently focused his efforts on fulfilling the particular needs of the market, illustrates both sides of the coin. Smith draws a picture of him as a writer often stranded in “interzones”: too pessimistic and unpredictable for American readers, too market-orientated for the new wave; a devoted fan (after leaving the RAF he hoped to “spend a year at home writing [...] and fanning”), but apparently unpopular on the convention scene.

Though coming from a university press – it forms part of the Modern Masters of Science Fiction series from the University of Illinois – this book isn’t steeped in literary criticism or swamped in

jargon; general readers interested in the subject will find it perfectly accessible. Where it is polemical, it’s in support of Smith’s ideas rather than his politics, in particular his thesis that Brunner’s whole oeuvre is worth studying, not just the books that won awards; he wants to situate “his better-known works within the larger arc of his career”. He shows how Brunner’s writing career did not progress neatly from Ace entertainments to hardback Hugo-winning literature. Rather, the two types of book intertwined throughout his career, as he rushed some books out to fund the concentrated spells of attention that more ambitious works required.

That *Stand on Zanzibar* was released to a hostile reception, and treated as a commercial, American appropriation of the New Wave, may be a surprise to readers accustomed to regarding it as a well-established part of the science fiction canon. A review of *Telepathist* in *Vector* described it as the kind of affected intellectualism “one might expect from an author who sports a goatee and a wine-coloured corduroy jacket”. Although the book is very much on Brunner’s side in such matters – Moorcock, Aldiss and Platt are portrayed as nothing short of schoolyard bullies – it does acknowledge his moodiness and, for example, *Zanzibar*’s immense debt to Dos Passos. Asides such as that describing “John and Marjorie’s relationship as sexually open and emotionally tumultuous” suggest a biography proper would be worthwhile.

Given that this is a book which, very usefully, draws on several hard-to-find primary sources, it’s disappointing that it is so parsimonious with its quotations, rarely providing more than a line or two of Brunner himself. While that contributes to its readability, it does mean the reader is left to accept the author’s paraphrases

and interpretations of Brunner’s words, rather than being able to come to their own conclusions. A short interview is included, from 1975, but that gives us only a snapshot of a particular period of his writing. An extensive bibliography takes up the book’s last quarter, so at least signposts to the original texts are there for those who want to investigate further.

The book doesn’t provide a radical new way of looking at Brunner’s work – the overall effect is of a well-crafted and lengthy encyclopaedia entry written by someone with a slight bias towards the subject – but it argues well for the continuing interest and relevance of his work. Hard to disagree with that when Smith’s summary of *The Sheep Look Up* sounds like a week’s worth of headlines from *The Independent*: “Fish stocks are depleted. Natural bee populations have collapsed [...] Human bodies fester with once-controlled but now drug-resistant diseases.” Smith is also right to highlight the strangeness of such a book coming from the same writer as, say, *The Super Barbarians* and its goofy portrayal of human exceptionalism.

Readers unfamiliar with Brunner’s novels would find this a perfect introduction to them (except in so far as it gives away the plots, but that’s only to be expected in a critical study). Even those who have read the award winners may find their interest piqued by discussion of fringe titles: *The Atlantic Abomination* sounds much better than the title would suggest. Smith mentions in places that certain works were never reprinted, and it’s a sad fact that Brunner was almost entirely out of print at the time of his death, but one pleasure of reading this book is knowing almost all of it is now available via the SF Gateway. This book left me keen to read more Brunner, and also to read further titles in the Modern Masters range.



THE GRIM COMPANY

Luke Scull

Head of Zeus hb, 449pp, £16.99

THE TWYNING

Terence Blacker

Head of Zeus hb, 391pp, £16.99

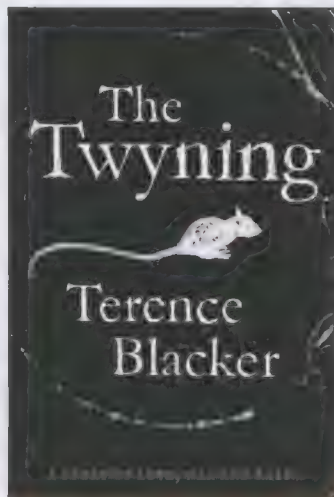
THE ROOK

Daniel O'Malley

Head of Zeus hb, £16.99

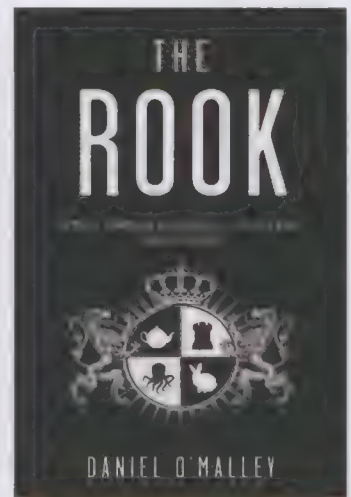
Jim Steel

This cheekily-named new imprint (there have already been at least two Minerva Presses) is investing heavily in thrillers and historical fiction. It is also strongly committed to fantasy, and its lead title is the first volume in a sword and sorcery trilogy from first-time novelist and game-designer Luke Scull. At first *The Grim Company* feels rushed, with a world quickly flung together and names carelessly mined from the western tradition, and at the start characters tend to spend time comparing the effectiveness of various types of armour while fighting. You can almost hear the die rolling. One character's last words are ripped straight from *Blade Runner* (yes, *that* line). But Scull has invested time in his characters, and his disparate crowd move through the



pages revealing surprising depths. It's a violent world and the plot to overthrow a sorcerous dictator is delightfully nuanced. Most of the characters, regardless of loyalty, have a valid viewpoint. A satisfyingly big conclusion leaves enough mess and intrigue to make volume two a tempting prospect. It's not the most original fantasy you'll ever read, but it's an enjoyable romp at the heart of the genre.

Terence Blacker is an established author who has seen *The Twyning* promoted as "Water-ship Down with rats", a facetious yet useful description. If you're allergic to Moorcock's "talking vermin" then this is obviously not for you. Split between the viewpoints of the Victorian urchin Peter and sewer rat Efrin, it tells of the war between the rat and the human civilisations. While this may appear to be a YA title on the surface, it most certainly must be approached with caution. The animal cruelty (inflicted by humans, dogs and rats) is enough on its own to ensure that it should only be read by mature readers, regardless of age. HoZ has produced a beautifully laid-out book here, and Blacker's modernist prose is an effervescent delight, but advance notice of the glossary at the end might have helped the reader on



occasion.

The Rook has the lightest touch of the three and is different again. Daniel O'Malley is another first-time novelist and his urban fantasy/thriller is set in present-day London. Myfanwy Thomas wakes up with amnesia and finds that she is an agent for the Chequy Group, an organisation that fights supernatural evil. At times this feels as if Nick Harkaway has been commissioned to write a Harry Potter sequel featuring the adventures of the grown-up characters. This is not a condemnation, merely an observation. Myfanwy is a very likeable person and is pleasant company when exploring conspiracies, and there are enough supernatural villains to satisfy the fans of such things. The chess motif is woefully underplayed if you're hoping for a fantastical *Zugzwang* but this was never, I suspect, one of O'Malley's aims.

So what to make of Head of Zeus? It is highly unlikely that the same reader will enjoy all of its titles, since there isn't a house style. All three reviewed here are fine novels, and each deserves to find its audience. Scull is the rawest of the authors but also the one that shows most room for growth. It's going to be interesting to see where he goes from here.



WHITE HORSE

Alex Adams

Simon & Schuster pb, 400pp, £7.99

Barbara Melville

When I read the first half of *White Horse*, I wanted to yell, "Oh Alex Adams, where have you been hiding?" But, after the second, I just wanted to scream. In introducing this book I share with you an issue: the hackneyed premise. Stop me if you've heard it: ninety percent of the population are dead from a disturbing disease – which is probably all science's fault – and our pregnant thirty-something protagonist goes in search of her lover. Now, some of my favourite stories revisit done-to-death ideas and spin them in surprising ways, but this one doesn't, at least not in its plot. It's like a chimera of other stories from TV, books and film: *The Children of Men*, *The Last Train* and *Survivors*, to name a few. I suppose it didn't play with my expectations enough. But, in spite of all this, I still felt immersed; a hybrid of love and hatred.

I pondered why I still enjoyed it, and even asked myself as I read: does plot matter? When I got to the really unbelievable

parts – such as where she bumps into the US President on a boat in the middle of Europe – the answer was yes, yes it does. But in the early chapters, before it starts resembling a bad episode of *Dallas*, I felt absorbed for three main reasons. The first is the writing itself – Adams' prose is nothing short of breathtaking. The second is the structure – as worn as this plot is, it twists in all the right places. And third, the narration and characterisation – the originality of our protagonist Zoe is almost enough to melt away the flaws. Her monologues switch between the past – the previous year where she navigates life's foibles with her therapist, and the present – a monstrous, dying world. The payoff between realities is clever, not because there's some hollow exercise in contrast, but because there isn't. Zoe is gutsy and compelling in both.

But, even with its sophisticated plus points, there's something I cannot forgive: her metaphors. Now, some of these are strong – and the troubling ones are only troubling due to pile ups. For example, when Zoe investigates a church in a small village, she hears an animal eating a corpse: "It's a cat's tongue dragging along a meat chunk, keratin hooks stripping away the flesh". But the inhumanity of this image loses power as she keeps on metaphorising: "It's the slurping of noodles from a foam bowl". OK, yes, I see what you did there. "It's the sucking of marrow from freshly snapped bones". OK, really, you can stop now. Such superficial distractions do the book no favours, especially when it has deeper problems. But, in spite of all this, when I ask myself – do I recommend it or not? – the answer is still yes. What can I say? It managed to get its keratin hooks into me.



THE HOLDERS

Julianna Scott

Strange Chemistry pb, 368pp, £7.99

Simon Marshall-Jones

Seventeen-year-old Becca has a younger brother called Ryland (or just Ry) who has, for many years, been hearing voices. His sister believes there's nothing wrong with him, even though a stream of medical professionals come to their house to attempt to persuade their mother that he needs to be institutionalised. Becca resists this at all costs, until the day when the gentle Alex and the somewhat sinister Taron come calling, offering Ryland the chance to start a new life in Ireland at St Brigid's school. Initially wary, Becca eventually accedes to the request but only on the condition that she be allowed to accompany him on his trip overseas. And so their adventures begin, whirling the pair into a world they could hardly have imagined.

The journey (or more accurately journeys) is not just confined to the spatial – it's just as much about temporal, spiritual and mental metamorphoses. In this opening book in *The Holders* quadrilogy, nothing much really 'happens' (relatively speaking), with the

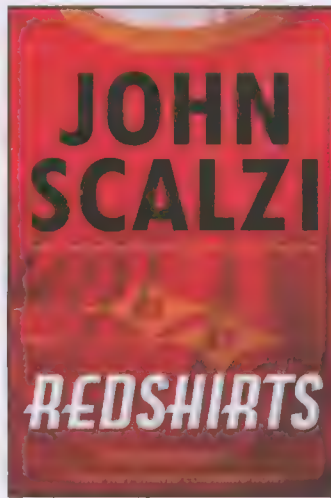
main thrust of the narrative existing to establish background in terms of the protagonists' characters and the history of the Holders themselves.

The pace picks up towards the end, however, nicely foreshadowing the battles to come. Characterisation is where this book excels (even if they are somewhat standard), with each one possessing the essential quality of realism which allows readers to identify with them. The layers of the Holders' considerable history are revealed gradually, painting a picture that reaches into Ireland's mysterious mythic past.

Necessarily, this being a Young Adult book seemingly aimed primarily at teenage girls (and that is not meant to be a dismissive statement by any means), the central pivot around which everything revolves is the growing relationship between Becca and Alex. Scott handles their burgeoning romance well, if a little idealistically, without ever wandering into the territory beyond kissing – but which, nevertheless, subtly hints at broader themes which may be explored later as the series progresses.

If there is a problem with *The Holders*, it's mainly to do with the story itself – much of what happens is predictable to a certain degree: signposts and pointers are scattered liberally throughout the tale, allowing a switched-on teen to foresee some of the revelations fairly early on, although not all. Viewpoint can be confusing as well, with Becca sometimes assuming things about other characters that she can't know for sure.

Reservations aside, there is much promise contained within the book's pages – as a series opener, it gives enough hints as to where it's going to whet the appetite. And that's always a good thing.



REDSHIRTS

John Scalzi

Gollancz tpb, 309pp, £14.99

Jack Deighton

For the first two-thirds of *Redshirts* the thought recurs that it's either the most intriguing piece of SF you have read in a long time or else a sad waste of dead tree. The set-up has replacement crewmembers on a starship slowly noticing strange events occurring – especially to those who attract the attention of senior officers and are as a result assigned to accompany them on away missions, where, invariably, one of the minions is at best badly injured, at worst killed. So far, so interesting.

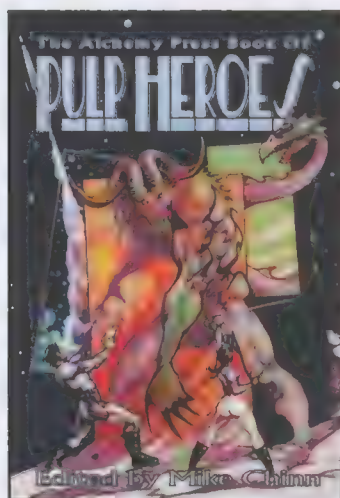
The trouble is that the main characters are barely worthy of the name, being more or less indistinguishable. Moreover we are treated to various mundanities of their lives normally omitted in fiction. Yes, they are supposed to be walk-on parts in a different narrative, a bad Science Fiction TV series from our time, and hence might be expected not to be fully fleshed – but they are the main characters in ours and doesn't the reader always deserve more? Moreover, dialogue is rendered as "Dahl said", "Duvall said", etc, making it

feel like a shopping list. The prose rarely rises above the leaden and workmanlike. And yet the text plays games with narrative and with the reader, features characters who become aware of themselves as players in a story and who take steps to alter their fate. There is even a false ending, allowing Scalzi to address the reader directly.

Viewers of a certain 1960s US TV series – which bears a superficial resemblance to the scenario here – may have noticed certain... illogicalities. Scalzi clearly enjoys laying out the faults, the playing fast and loose with the laws of physics, the lack of internal consistency, the black box resolutions, which can plague such an enterprise. It is generally not regarded as a good idea for a Science Fiction novel explicitly to refer to SF, yet given the subject matter here it would be remiss not to. Indeed the plot of *Redshirts* depends on it.

After the amended ending – and making up the last third of the novel *Redshirts* as an entity – we have no less than three codas, subtitled first person, second person, third person, each narrated in its titular mode, respectively by the writer of, and two of the actors in, the TV series. These comment on, illuminate and extend what has gone before. The writer is not cheered by criticism distinguishing between bad writing and being a bad writer, the actors find their destiny in life. While the codas' styles are disparate, and thus a welcome relief, the last still has dialogue framed like a shopping list. Crucially though, the characters in them feel real.

In the main narrative Scalzi shows he can do bad writing very well. (Now there's a back-handed compliment.) If you don't know what's to come in the codas, though, if you're not, say, reading *Redshirts* for review, that could be a fairly large hurdle to overcome.



**THE ALCHEMY PRESS BOOK
OF PULP HEROES**

edited by Mike Chinn

Alchemy Press pb, 246pp, £10.00

Ian Hunter

Back in the day, I don't know if the pulps came with that intoxicating newly printed smell that accompanies the latest issue of *Interzone*, but I suspect reading them might have left you with ink-stained fingers. No such worries with *The Alchemy Press Book of Pulp Heroes*, but some of the stories might leave a lasting stain or impression on your mind. For a book with a blurb that mentions that it is following in the tradition of *The Bat*, *Doc Savage*, *The Shadow* etc, you know what you are in for behind an impressive cover from Bob Covington. The pulps, of course, covered many genres, and Chinn has gathered a collection of stories that are spread across crime, amazing adventures, noir, science fiction, superheroes, occult adventures, and even wacky westerns.

I'm not going to go through the collection story by story, but I thought strongest of the bunch were Joel Lane's 'Upon a Granite Wind', dedicated to Robert E. Howard, and Mike Resnick's 'Origin' which cleverly might just

tell the story of how a pulp legend began.

It's all very well living in the heart of Metropolis – what do you do when you live in the suburbs a long way from where the “capes” do their stuff? Bracken N. MacLeod's 'Ivy's Secret Origin' tells a story of a housewife rising to the occasion. Heroes also feature in two stories that end the anthology, namely Peter Crowther's 'Heroes and Villains' and Peter Atkins' 'The Return of Kid Justice', and in both stories you are in the safe hands of two consummate wordsmiths. Crowther knows his comics and his story is a touching tale of when the stuff of life and death interrupts the shenanigans; while Atkins' story involves a pensioner who played the teenage sidekick of a hero a long time ago on television and who must come to the rescue of a boy, and possibly himself.

But not all the pulps were about heroes, and Chris Iovenko's 'The Perfect Murder' is a great, noir-ish tale of an author who has written about the perfect murder and who gets hired by the beautiful wife of a tycoon to carry it out for real. As a fan of Ross Macdonald's *Lew Archer* novels, this rattling tale read like a collection of the blurbs from the back of those books. Iovenko's story wore the garish cloak of pulpdom well, as did Anne Nicholls' exotic adventure 'Eyes of Day, Eyes of Night' and Adrian Cole's occult romp 'The Vogue Prince', and it was nice to see a fellow Scot, William Meikle, write about a fictional Scot, one Professor Challenger, who gets involved in a tale involving yet another real-life Scot (no spoilers here) who has released beasts from another dimension. Where's Quatermass when you need him? Well, he might be in volume two, which I hope will be just as enjoyable as this first one.



**THE MAD SCIENTIST'S
DAUGHTER**

Cassandra Rose Clarke

Angry Robot pb, 414pp, £8.99

Elaine Gallagher

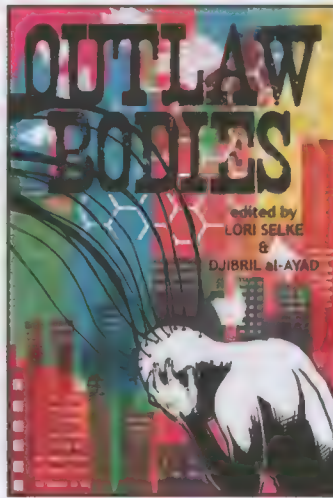
This wonderful novel is the story of Cat, who has a robot tutor as she is growing up, and who falls in love with him as she grows older despite society's prejudices against artificial intelligence. This is a very intimate story; it deals with major issues such as the rights of sentient beings, and environmental disaster, but they are always seen in terms of how they impinge on Cat's life and relationships. The prose is as intimate; beautifully written, it focuses on Cat's interest in stories and history and the aesthetics of her surroundings as she grows up to become an artist.

The background of the story is one where the world has been depopulated by storms. Advances in AI have led to the development of sentient robot workers who have rebuilt the cities and restored the climate. In return, humans resent the robots, and the presence of the android Finn in Cat's household leads her to be ostracised in school and to be regarded as the “mad scientist's daughter” of the

title. Cat grows more and more attached to Finn through school and after, and eventually their relationship becomes physical when she turns to him for comfort after the death of her mother. But she is never convinced that it is possible for Finn, a construct of software who is programmed to exhibit kindness, to ever really love her in return. Cat eventually marries Richard, a rich robotics entrepreneur, in order to find social acceptance and financial stability, but finds that the marriage is a mistake, poisoned by her feelings for Finn and Richard's eventual jealousy.

In other hands this might have been a novel of issues, of revolution and politics and fighting against the enslavement of sentient beings. All those issues are present in the story but it's made very personal by Cat's love for Finn, which is in turn undermined by her own anti-machine prejudice. The novel concerns the mistake of using people as a means to an end; Cat uses Finn for comfort and discards him for a convenient marriage, using Richard just as cynically. Finn was, we find later, created for a purpose and abandoned by his creator when he didn't suit that purpose.

The novel is also about how Cat and Finn achieve their potential in spite of convention. Cat's mother, in a wonderfully ironic passage, tells Cat that this is the modern world and she is free to do what she likes, while dismissing Cat's choice to study the arts and not become an engineer like her mother. Cat's marriage is an attempt to gain her mother's posthumous approval and that of society, and she only flourishes once she is free of it. For Finn, it is Cat's father's recognition that he is a person, and his decision to take him into his family, that starts the process of freeing him to be able to love Cat.



OUTLAW BODIES
edited by Lori Selke &
Djibril al-Ayad

Future Fire pb, 168pp, £8.00

Matthew S. Dent

If science fiction has a point beyond simple entertainment – and I would imagine most *Interzone* readers would say it does – I would submit that the most likely candidate is to push boundaries and challenge norms. So it's fairly encouraging to see *Outlaw Bodies* wedding itself to that idea from the introduction: an anthology revolving around “any body that defies social norms and expectations”. With that as a mission statement, Jo Thomas' ‘Good Form’ is a good start. Painting a strangely alarming vision of the future, it shows the construction and education of an artificial intelligence. The conclusion leaves an unsettling taste, with deeper musings on the nature of intelligence.

Vylar Kaftan's ‘She Called Me Baby’ is a story about a mother-daughter relationship, ramped up to eleven as the daughter is a clone; a publicity gimmick by her “mother”. It's a subtle story, wearing its themes softly and with a lightly emotional touch, and an ending which sadly strays a little

into the predictable (or perhaps inevitable?). ‘Millie’ by Anna Caro went to the heart of the anthology's theme. A girl without a body struggles to grow up experiencing the world through an artificial aid which is more like a pet. It was a good story, but tended to confuse and lose me along the way.

I rather liked ‘Her Bones, Those of the Dead’ by Tracie Welser, yet thinking on it I'm not entirely sure why. It was a simple yet effective story about a character uncomfortable in her skin, seeking the solitude and comfort of another way of life. It stuck with me long after I had turned the page on it – which can only be a compliment.

My least favourite offering, ‘Mouth’ by M. Svarini started out promisingly but faded into a straightforward erotic fantasy. ‘The Remaker’ by Fabio Fernandes is, I think, my favourite. It kept me guessing, uncertain until it was done whether I actually did like it or not. It's a story about a literary mystery, set in a vastly transformed world, but which moves to the sort of fundamental themes on which the anthology sets its sights. The popular culture references get a bit grating, but the writing glimmers and the characters crackle with life.

Closing out the collection, Stacy Sinclair's ‘Winds: NW 20 km/hr’ is another very good story. It manages to weave compelling themes of motherhood, fatherhood and what it means to be human into a surprisingly short piece. An excellent curtain-closer.

Outlaw Bodies features some very good stories. Unfortunately it also hamstring itself to some extent with a sense of inconsistency. Some of the stories in the collection were outclassed by the subjects they set themselves. That inconsistency, and the failure of some of the pieces to measure up, leaves a sense of disappointment which mars the experience.

MILITANT POPCORN NICK LOWE

CLOUD ATLAS

BEAUTIFUL CREATURES

WARM BODIES

WRECK-IT RALPH

SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED

GRABBERS

ANTIVIRAL



There is a natural order to this world, and those who try to upend it do not fare well." And indeed films as mad as **CLOUD ATLAS** have a history of not faring well, from Bill Forsyth's *Being Human* to Aronofsky's *Fountain* and Jaco von Dormael's *Mr Nobody*. But if David Mitchell's novel isn't unfilmable, then the Wachowski/Tykwer adaptation shouldn't be unsummarisable, so here in one sentence goes nothing. In 1849, Jim Sturgess is voyaging from the Chathams to Hawaii with his brain being slowly eaten by a parasitic worm that is not what it seems; in 1936 Edinburgh his journal intrigues budding composer Ben Whishaw during his fraught apprenticeship to a Delius-like maestro on the wane; in 1973 San Francisco the musician's letters, and the composition they chronicle, haunt journalist Halle Berry as she investigates a perilous nuclear scandal; the manuscript of her thrillerised tale spurs Jim Broadbent's vanity publisher in his comedic escape from a 2012 northern rest home; the ensuing film of his larky misadventures inspires 2144 Korean clone-drone turned revolutionary Doona Bae, whose testament is a post-apocalyptic humanity's last religion two centuries later when Hawaiian

tribesman Tom Hanks allies with a techno-anthropologist against tribal barbarians and his own living hallucinated demons in a mission to save Earth's last civilised humans.

It's a fairly gigantic story, as Sturgess's pivotal act of humanitarian kindness pinballs down the buffers of centuries, genres, and continents, to end up determining the fate of the world by a domino chain of acts of human dignity and defiance whose full consequentiality is apprehensible only to the viewer, and modulates from period adventure through episodic tragedy to crime thriller, farce, techno-dystopia, and elegiac Wellsian oral history. Even at three hours, much of this has had to be considerably simplified down from the book versions of each, with plotlines drastically decluttered, the unreliability of the various narratives dialled back, and the interlaced endings severally pimped for film-friendly romantic closure. Sometimes this reverses the polarity of the original story, as particularly in the incongruous and nonsensical interplanetary uplift to the chronological finale, which now not only infelicitously recycles the plot of *Battleship*, but replaces the novel's elegy for civilisation's end with a heroic future among the stars, ageing the teen-

age lead up and his fifty-year-old partner down for a final hookup he can tell to their little 'uns two generations later ("Which one is Earth, granddad?"). More radically still, the earlier sf story has lost its climactic twist – possibly because it's the same one as in *The Matrix Reloaded*, from which one now wonders whether Mitchell unconsciously nicked it in the first place.

Mitchell's original structure famously matryoshkas his sextet of novellas in a nest of cliffhanged embeddings from past to future and back again, with each story framed as a not-quite-kosher narrative within the next. So integral is this device to the novel's machinery that it seems impossible that any film version could accommodate it; but the Wachowski-Tykwer team have done three crazy things to this, of which one approaches genius, one is a bonkers filmic conceit that is nevertheless entirely in tune with the novel's aesthetic of forbidden transpersonal connections across epic boundaries of time, genre, and narrative form, and one is a quite terrible idea that comes close to sinking the entire vessel. The brilliant idea has been to dismantle the novel, with Mitchell's enthusiastic complicity, and reassemble it using the apparatus of horizontal cross-connections already built into the six stories to interlace them from the start and intercut rapidly between. To appreciate how little this should work, you only have to look at *The Two Towers*; but the Tykwer-Wachowskis have ransacked the book for sideways connections enabling them to swing from one narrative vine to at least one other without dropping a dramatic beat, and the resulting pace and variety are what keep the film going for the three-hour running time needed to find room for even this stripped-down arrangement of

the sextet. Even the unenthused viewer would have to allow that it's an extremely attentive reading of the novel, pulling out of it connections and clues that old-school sequential reading easily misses. Indeed, one of the things that the book artfully hides but the film displays is that all the stories are chaconne variations on a single master plot, where a forbidden relationship across tectonic social faultlines leads to collective salvation through personal choice and sacrifice.

But that is not in itself the film's defining madness. Most of the discomfort that has been expressed in early territories has centred on the bizarre casting strategy of recycling performers between stories and roles with mischievous disregard for conventional boundaries of age, gender, and most provocatively race. Each of the six leads, plus recurring villains Hugo Weaving and Hugh Grant and a good chunk of the wider supporting cast, pops up in supporting roles in the others' stories, sometimes recognisably, more often in outright special makeup that gives the film's human surface a pervasive texture of the surreptitiously monstrous and grotesque. North American viewers, who saw this before *The Hobbit*, were bemused and largely repelled, but one advantage of the *Atlas*'s leisurely global release-stagger has been that it now arrives before European and Australasian audiences acclimatised by multiple viewings of high-definition latex-faced dwarves to a taste for something beyond banal naturalism in makeup; and if nothing else the wilful silliness of some of the cross-casting makes a powerful statement about how much fun the film is having. Some of the special makeup is actually rather good; the wildest stuff is mostly reserved for the Korean dystopia, whose genetically-engineered

characters are deliberately plasty anyway; and in practical terms, though none of the team is terribly chameleonic and Broadbent in particular is hard to deploy with any versatility, it's allowed an impossibly sprawling roster of characters to be affordable from a limited cast while attracting a decent catch of marquee names to the actorly challenge itself. (One of them was meant to be Natalie Portman, who introduced Lana W to the novel on the set of *V for Vendetta*, but fortunately it took so long to raise the money that she got up the duff in the meantime and had to surrender her part to a real Korean, probably saving the film in the process.)

It would have been perfectly possible to leave the casting gimmick as merely a playful cinematic conceit, but unfortunately the film is keen that we take this stuff seriously, and reread the book as an epic generational saga of lives across lives. It's true that some of the novel's interconnections flirt lightly with ideas of reincarnation, but not in a way that aligns easily with the film's intercasting – which would actually, for example, need Whishaw 1936 and Berry 1973 to be played by the same performer, a queering too far for even the broadminded starship siblings. This encouragement to think of the actors as literally the same souls over and over sits uncomfortably against the very strongly articulated theme that "Our lives are not our own; from womb to tomb we are bound to others and in every crime and every kindness rebirth our future ... The nature of our immortal lives is in the consequences of our words and deeds." Yet these words themselves are Wachowski, not Mitchell, and summarise the book as well as anything in it, if a bit more portentously – so perhaps it's mean-spirited to blame them for not quite knowing when to stop.

At the very least, it's a landmark in film production, using international funding structures and coproduction arrangements to do something insanely expensive and wildly left field and independent that no US studio would go near, yet which already seems on track from its overseas business to turn something approaching a profit. The involvement of "Team Tykwer" has been a canny investment, not just in opening up German funding, facilities, and market share, but as a safer pair of hands for the more modestly budgeted contemporary and twentieth-century stories. The limited Euro-locations are spread a bit thin: Mallorca doesn't look much like Polynesia, and the Scottish co-production cash has not only moved the entire Belgian strand (1936) to Edinburgh but opened up a portal in spacetime where Berry can step off a soundstage in seventies Frisco and find herself in what is quite obviously present-day Anderston in Glasgow. But these are little things for little minds in a big, unashamedly barmy film with more ideas than most years' entire cinema output, even if at least half of them are bonkers. Certainly it leaves the far more lauded and lucrative *Life of Pi*, a thumpingly pious adaptation of a much lesser and less unfilmable book, looking insipid in its shade; and in a week when you can win Best Picture by pretending that the greatest unmade sf film of the seventies, the Jack Kirby-designed version of *Lord of Light*, was not in fact pirated by the CIA for their Iranian escapade but legally signed over by its (to this day unpaid) producers, here is a film proud to burn money thumbing its nose at Hollywood's deadening timidity, with an enthusiasm for the impossible you'd need a heart of ice and an underengorged sense of absurdity to resist.



Richard LaGravenese's **BEAUTIFUL CREATURES** performs many of the same surgical strategies, but with much less sense of why, on the first of Kami Garcia and Margaret Stohl's busy quartet of YA paranormal romances: an early product of Hollywood's buying spree in the genre four years ago, when prospective new *Twilights* were on everyone's grocery list. But though the southern-gothic series about a South Carolina teen's entanglement with a family of witches has a solid fanbase, the film has not been made with them in mind. In place of the reverent fidelity demanded in the *Twilight* or *Hunger Games* films, LaGravenese's adaptation has seen the book savagely chewed and tossed by studio forces till what's left is only partly recognisable as the remains of the novel. It starts quite well, if you can get past the fact that lead Alden Ehrenreich could easily more pass for thirty than for a high-school senior, while Jane Campion's scion Alice Englert is charismatic and able but clearly the wrong side of drinking age for a plot that turns entirely and queasily on turning legal: "When I turn sixteen, I may not even be who I am now. My powers will be claimed for either the light or the dark, depending on my true nature." Needless to say, this applies only to girls; boys get to choose, but Englert is claimed by "the curse"... well, you see where this is going. And sure enough, when best cuz Emmy Rossum hits the big one-six and turns dark she goes straight off luring boys to their death on railtracks with her new witchy pheromones, so that

Englert herself has every reason to be concerned about the way her eyeliner seems to be getting progressively thicker and blacker as the big day approaches.

LaGravenese sticks with the book for much of this, including the injection an hour in of a whole Addams family of new characters you couldn't care less about, and goes along with the authors' reading-is-cool proreptic (Garcia's background is in literacy education) as far as the canon of the seventies: Vonnegut, Burroughs, Bukowski, Burgess are in, but even the editions seem those of the makers' childhood, though the local cinema is showing copy-right-free misspellings of *Inception* and the latest *Final Destination*. The film version is if anything even more tolerant than the novel of interminable orgies of brows-ing in the authors' fantasy of a literally underground library, and even displays a startlingly aggressive new streak of angry secularist polemic against southern Baptist book-banning. But it jumps the tracks entirely in its long, slow second hour, with a new ending that bizarrely manages not only to erase the narrator entirely from the climax but to wipe his memory of the events he's been narrating. The novel's busy dynastic tree of characters is understandably pollarded and several characters significantly reconceived, but some of the changes are merely surreal: the hero's father (and his subplot) banished from the screen action entirely and locked in his study for the duration; Viola Davis' necromantic housekeeper inexplicably doubling up as the town librarian (a quite different character in the books), presumably in a last-ditch studio attempt to make the role beefy enough for a star by rolling up two major parts into one, to no great avail. Perhaps she should have done it in Wachowski makeup.



WARM BODIES, from Isaac Marion's novel, applies the same Montagu/Capulet genre formula with above-average wit to the zombie-apocalypse movie, with Nicholas Hoult's lead "R" impelled to feed on the expositional brains of humans, but infected with a redeeming love for Teresa Palmer's "Julie" (there's a lot of this) after he eats her boyfriend's grey matter and ingests a bellyfull of flashback. It turns out OK, because the boyfriend was turning into her dad anyway and she was kind of over him, while for reasons handwaved through the logic checkpoint love turns out to be the trigger for a cure for undeadness and everyone else gets better too as their hearts turn glowy and start to beat again. The scenario takes elegant advantage of the way zombiehood has modulated over the decades from a supernatural to a pathological condition, a convenient metonym for a biological apocalypse in which blood-borne diseases with names like T-virus and Rage turn you into a simulacrum of a brain-eating ambulant corpse. But as the liberal-minded heroine deadpans, "Corpse is just as stupid name that we came up with for a state of being that we don't understand," and the fact that it makes no conceivable neurological or metabolic sense becomes just another part of our reprehensible refusal of understanding.

The clever thing about Marion's novel, which the film follows fairly closely but improves on by dialling the comedy a few notches up, is that unlike vampires, werewolves, and witches, zombies have hitherto been the one class of genre other whose voice has not really been sympathetically heard. Unlike vampires, the ruling class of the romanticisable undead, zombies are intrinsically B-movie, dumb, and ironic. As the rights of other undead creatures to be recognised as fully capable of teen yearning are progressively recognised, zombies have remained an underclass, the unloved bottom of the cultural food chain, and the very idea that they might have feelings is as intrinsically preposterous as it would be for *Cloud Atlas*' slaves and clones. They're also a much better metaphor for teenage masculinity than sparkly bloodsucking immortals, with their shambling gait and language of shrugs ("What's wrong with my posture? Why can't I connect with people?") belying a seething inner life of inchoate feelings that are richly expressible only in the voiceovering head, emerging into the world only as painfully inarticulate grunts. But if you can find one whose mancave is full of collectible vinyl and is gentlemanly enough not to force himself on you and munch on your pulverised cortex, why, girl, you've got yourself a keeper.



Another version of the same plot comes to life in **WRECK-IT RALPH**, Disney's long-brewed flipside project to the *Tron* franchise in which arcade-game characters lead after-hours *Toy Story* lives of their own. But creatures of pixels and algorithms have feelings too, and the game universe's caste system of heroes and villains leaves underclassers like Ralph yearning for a life in the penthouse instead of the dump, leading him and his Marioesque nemesis Felix on a lifechanging journey into other game worlds and unexpected bonds across barriers of class and disability, as Felix finds romance with a hot *Call of Duty* chick and Ralph becomes surrogate dad to a digitally handicapped little girl battling social exclusion and prejudice to win her medal in the great kart-race of life. Disney's most Pixarised film yet, it pops with sight gags and nostalgic digital cameos, and pummels the sentimentality buttons so relentlessly that you can almost, but not quite, miss the unsettling reflections on the realities of class and mobility in its candy-pink world of algorithmised dreams where the only way out is to hack your own code. Strangely limited in its actual gallery of game worlds, it did feature a Sims-styled fourth world in earlier stages of development; but animation is ruthless with stuff that doesn't do more than be brilliant, and the film is frank about what awaits those vintage enough ("They say we're retro, which I think means old but cool") to be vulnerable to the march of obsolescence.



Still with the forbidden fantasy valentines, **SAFETY NOT GUARANTEED** is essentially a romcom version of a Brit Marling film: one of those Sundance numbers that recycle some version of the plot of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the original minimalist two-hander, with a modestly budgeted sf twist that keeps you lightly guessing till the end as to whether it will in fact arrive, while knowing better than to leave it undelivered. As in *Another Earth* and *Sound of my Voice*, the plot turns on a dangerous deception to get close to a hostile investigative target, only for the infiltrant to find their sympathies conflicted and their principles uncomfortably tested. The film is based on what must now qualify as the shortest sf story ever rights-sold, the virally famous 1997 small ad knocked out by John Silveira to fill a space in Oregon survivalist magazine *Backwoods Home* asking for "Someone to go back in time with me. This is not a joke," though it was. "You'll get paid after we get back. Must bring your own weapons. I have only done this once before." Silveira himself is credited as "time travel consultant", and cameos in the maildrop stakeout as the guy who turns out not to have placed the ad. Curiously, though his ad is used verbatim, its last three sentences are completely ignored in the actual film, the whole point of which is that the would-be time-traveller *hasn't* done it before. (The weapons stuff would presumably make better sense to *Backwoods Home's* Oregon readership.)

The film's actual approach to its premise is a disappointingly simple-minded thought experiment about what you would do if you had the power to go back – with the answers limited to undoing romantic or familial regrets, and curiously little thought given to tsunami warnings or dropping dime on the 9/11 conspirators. But though the plot runs more or less exactly on the lines expected – evidence swings back and forth between for-real and nutjob; she falls for him, he learns the truth, she has to earn back his trust; the ending does something on a scale between *Repo Man* and *Take Shelter* – the human comedy is sharply written, with some deft use of time-travel logic when things turn out to be very much not what we were told, and an unexpectedly sweet secondary-romance subplot which comes close to stealing the film away from the leads. The ending was shot in multiple versions and changed repeatedly; you confidently expect the payoff to be that he will be apprehended and she'll get to go back in his place to fix his life for him beyond the end of the film, but this isn't in fact what happens, no doubt because they already went back and changed it.



Odd-couple romance blooms again with predictable unexpectedness in insistently genial cross-border Irish homebrew **GRABBERS**, which mashes up *Monsters with Whisky Galore* as an invasion of Aran-like "Erin Island" by bloodsucking tentacled aliens whose one weakness is a toxic reaction to metabolised alcohol – whereupon sozzled local Garda Richard Coyle and his teetotal big-city partner Ruth Bradley invite the whole island to a lock-in with a free bar as their last bulwark against the assault. No opportunity is lost to present the Republic's western riviera (actually played by coastal Donegal) as photogenically as the fleeting gaps in the horizontal rain will permit, and to celebrate the warm community-binding power of chronic alcohol abuse, with rousing community renditions of Whiskey in the Jar and The Irish Rover banishing all threat of booze-fuelled domestic violence and irreversible organ damage, and the only threat coming from tentacle-happy digital space cephalopods bent on draining our veins and spitting out our heads. Romance is lubricated by the sauce as he cold-turkeys while she gets off her face, lightens up, and feels her social inhibitions washed away on a tide of happy; while only the effete English exobiologist (a quite terrible Russell Tovey) shows the least sign of needing to throw up or otherwise react adversely to life-threatening levels of alcohol poisoning. Potential alien tourists can consider themselves warned.



At least there's no stinting on gruesome symptoms in Brandon Cronenberg's **ANTIVIRAL**, which marries his old man's trademark body horror with an Andrew Niccol line in near-future dystopian satire, positing a world in which commercialised genetic technology allow fans to purchase celebrities' copy-protected infectious diseases, cloned-tissue steaks, and skin grafts – only for Caleb Landry's inside trader to catch more than he bargained for when he illicitly infects himself with a celebrity siren's fatally weaponised assassination bug, and in an sf version of *DOA* has to unravel the mystery of her murder before he follows her to a nasty haemorrhagic end. Slick oligochrome production design and deft biotechnological stomach-turning offer a stylistic shoutout to Cronenberg senior's most prominent Canadian sf apostle, *Cube* and *Splice* auteur Vincenzo Natali, while Landry looks magnificently unwell throughout, and the forbidden romance this time around finds a distinctively creepy Cronenbergian consummation in the new-flesh world that is born from its mounting perversions. In a season of cinema where all films are avatars of one story in different makeup, and you can wander through a multiplex and still find yourself watching the same film six times over in different forms on every screen, this at least is something disgustingly else; and if the weak are meat the strong do eat, at least here you get to pig out on the stars.

LASER FOODER TONY LEE

NEVERLANDSCAPES:
PETER PAN (2000)
RETURN TO NEVER LAND
PETER PAN (2003)
NEVERLAND (2003)
FINDING NEVERLAND
NEVERLAND (2011)

CRAWLSPACE

LOOPER

GAME OF THRONES
SEASON 2*

ALPS

BEST BONDS:
LICENCE TO KILL
SKYFALL

***WIN THE BLU-RAY**

NEVERLANDSCAPES

Depending on how you timeline his origin, the boy who wouldn't grow up is at least 110 years old now. Adaptations of J.M. Barrie's beloved tales about Peter and Wendy have developed from a novelistic tribute to childhood fantasy into, very probably, the ultimate in franchised paracosmic narrative. Though Spielberg's unauthorised sequel effort/copyright evader *Hook* (1991) was the first movie to break out of mainstream core interpretation, to become a pan-dimensional postmodern adventure with death, let's see how the marketable timelessness of this popular fairy tale mythos was revised and redefined for the 21st century.

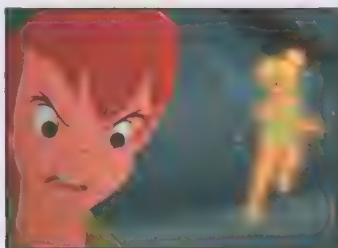
All the happy thoughts in the world cannot save grown ups from the seizure of cringing prompted by Spielberg's insipidly sentimentalist preoccupation with father-and-son issues in *Hook*, and his movie's typically lost-marbles/unreal solutions to modern parenting problems. As profoundly cinematic rendering of better imagined themes, Ridley Scott's earlier *Legend* remains far superior in the fairy tale stakes. But who's the bigger Pan now? While Disney's cartoon sequel **RETURN TO NEVER LAND** (2002) may have won over cert. U audiences for animated renderings, the earlier TV movie **PETER PAN** (2000) is likely to appeal to family fandom. It's a belated filming of the 1991 Broadway musical, which followed pantomime traditions of casting a female as the lead. Former US Olympic gymnast Cathy Rigby won plaudits for the original stage show, and with an assured charisma she dominates the screen, and rightly so. Although I dislike musicals generally, and I found a lot of the vaudeville antics were still cringeworthy, there are more than enough amusing one-



PETER PAN (2000)

liners and theatrically creative performances amidst the songs to appeal to genre fans. Rigby is impressively athletic, especially when flying on wires, and has a studied comic timing for in-jokes of androgyny and the juvenile concerns of motherless 'Lost Boys'. The show's pirates are especially panto while Tiger Lily's squaw dance strives for a traditional music hall style that is led by Captain Hook (Paul Schoeffler, doubling as Mr Darling), with little in the way of inspired choreography. Family audience participation is sadly limited to children's applause that 'revives' a poisoned Tinker Bell. It's often domestic/nostalgic as a sing-along lullaby but passes the time amiably.

P.J. Hogan's live-action movie **PETER PAN** (2003) benefits from visual effects by ILM. Fleeing repressed Edwardian London to fly at warp speed through cartoonish splendour of crowded space-ways to a post-Gilliam, Spielbergian realm is a promising start for this version, but it is hardly a thematic maturation for bright cert. PG visuals; more like a new century's re-polishing of charming nursery book art. Jeremy Sumpter plays Peter quite well as head-in-the-clouds protagonist (despite his role as offbeat 'kidnapper'), and he is surrounded by a supporting cast that collectively bring plenty of melancholy wit – wherein ageing is viewed as poisonous – to this familiar material, in which belief in fairies equates to a hopeful



RETURN TO NEVER LAND

romanticism in life's greatest walk-the-plank adventures. Hogan's version is distinguished by its somewhat quirky humour, even if a dull voiceover narration weakens the verve of its postmodern storytelling.

Another trope about an immortal male sneaking into a bedroom – to seduce a girl and carry her off into the night – is that of the vampire, typically ignored by most interpretations of *Peter Pan*. Although the character's perpetual innocence remains the same, Damion Dietz's **NEVERLAND** (2003) is a micro-budget indie revisionist noir that explores aspects of a benevolent vampire. It follows the *Peter Pan* script closely but adds frequent strong language, and gets away with many cross-genre conceits by delivering a cleverly devised fable about runaways in peril.

Here, Wendy is adopted and black, and the psychological symbolism of Peter's detached shadow is realised winningly as 'Shadow' is his car. Punk pusher Tink offers speed as 'fairy dust'. "Let's fly!" cues the blurry neon trip to a somewhat tacky carnival park called Neverland. Tiger Lily's "native American revue" is a drag queen show that is more campy than sleazy. The ghost train rides through tunnels leading to a teenage boys' den: "We can just kick back and listen to stories and shit." The carousel is overpraised as "a fucking trip!" but, as part of the background detail, it adds much to this movie's surreal theatrics



PETER PAN (2003)

which are loaded with contemporary relevance about broken dreams of modern youth, while skilfully avoiding pretension or condescension.

Maintenance chief Hook seems like a grade A sociopath, with his gay bondage hobby, while the excitably hip Peter enjoys a wild life of social freedom in spite of his obvious white-trash poverty. Imagine something like Walter Hill's *Streets of Fire*, plus Tobe Hooper's *Funhouse*, but minus their violent action and gruesome horrors, and you have a measure of the overall tone here. That's not to say *Neverland* lacks a genuine sense of menace to both morality and sanity though. Mortality is suggested while, except for Tink's junkie meltdown and Wendy being held in captivity by Hook and his gang, the inherent violence of this world is placed carefully off-screen. This is not a sanitised horror, it's a contemporary dark fantasy, and it's very effective as such.

Can troubled Peter become a daring yet responsible hero without growing up first? The director lacks the wholesale originality of a David Lynch, but does achieve a great many surprises with meagre resources, and *Neverland* is a marvellously stylised and intensely chilling tragedy that borders on experimental psychodrama.

FINDING NEVERLAND

(2004) is an excellent biographical drama directed by Marc Forster (maker of lamentable Bond sequel *Quantum of Solace* and forthcoming



NEVERLAND (2003)

ing zombie epic *World War Z*), who ably revises the true story details of BBC TV mini-series *The Lost Boys* (1978) – which starred Ian Holm as Barrie.

So, we have eccentric playwright Barrie (Johnny Depp) indulging in whimsical playtime fantasies with the sons of widowed Sylvia (Kate Winslet), and the authorial storytelling has a mind's-eye reality on screen. Martyr mum Sylvia's greatest act of pretending is that she's not terminally ill. Barrie's power of juvenile imagination irks cynical granny du Maurier (Julie Christie) and disappoints his own social-climbing wife Mary (Radha Mitchell), but he delights in being 'Uncle Jim' to the Davies boys. With brittle tolerance for his childish behaviour on one side and spousal jealousy on the other, it's a wonder that Barrie found a habitable, let alone comfortable, working environment conducive to such timeless creativity. Dustin Hoffman's presence as the theatre manager Frohman fixes a *Hook* connection. Freddie Highmore – whose highly impressive CV made him the go-to kid for genre movies – is great as precocious Peter.

With a tearjerker finale, on-stage (featuring Kelly Macdonald as Pan) and off, this is packed with charm and wit, and despite its inevitable family tragedy *Finding Neverland* is a wonderfully big-hearted adventure about death.

Some aspects of *Peter Pan* vaguely resemble Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* – filmed most strikingly in 2010 as a comedy-



FINDING NEVERLAND

drama by Julie Taylor (for whom Helen Mirren led a cast so good that even the inclusion of irksome Russell Brand could not spoil the movie). Both stories are set on fantasy islands, and explore the struggles of parenthood. Tinker Bell is analogous to the spirit Ariel. The wise magician Prospero contrasts with Peter, the lonely boy who rejects adult wisdom. Shipwrecked mariners compare to the *Lost Boys*. Miranda and Wendy both inhabit male-dominated worlds. Depictions of native monsters are found in *Caliban* and *Neverland's* crocodile. Just as Shakespeare's fantasy has been revised and updated, so too Barrie's opus found wider appeal by absorbing the traits and themes of other writers' works and/or mimicking a whole different genre of cinema.

"You're growing up quickly, Peter, but you still have a lot to learn." At first, the scenario for Nick Willing's TV mini-series **NEVERLAND** (2011) mixes up Barrie with a thread of Dickens, as the orphaned Peter leads a gang of little delinquent pickpockets. Edwardian London looks rather sanitised here, but its airbrushed underworld fits in with this curious story's theatrical tone. Graduating from street mugging to burglary, the 'snipes' (guttersnipes) hunt for the magical treasure of a crystal ball, an orb that is a teleportation device to a fantastic world, apparently mistaken for heaven.

Rhys Ifans makes for a grim



NEVERLAND (2011)

cockney criminal as Hook. Anna Friel is good fun as pirate queen Liz Bonny. Bob Hoskins plays himself, in panto mode (again), as plot explainer Mr Smee. Keira Knightley is the telepathic voice of silvery alien Tinker Bell. Charles Dance appears briefly as Elizabethan alchemist Dr Fludd, researching cosmic energy centred on a planet where time stands still. Measured against the stellar adult cast, Charlie Rowe (from Andrey Konchalovskiy's *The Nutcracker*) is underwhelming as Peter.

In part, the wounded Peter's amnesia stands in for his lost shadow. A climactic conflict between pirates and Indians refers to colonialism rather more obviously than previous versions of *Peter Pan*. Despite its catalogue of timewarped Indians and a lost Caribbean ship, the genre influences of *Labyrinth*, *Harry Potter*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* are sometimes blatantly evident in this populist re-interpretation, and so are *The Golden Compass*, *Lord of the Rings*, and even *Avatar* and *Dune* (with eight-legged crocodiles, not sandworms, and fairy dust as the one spice to rule the sky), all adding to a derivative medley of borrowed tropes. This is briskly entertaining and yet often clumsy in its reach for the big adventure prize of space fantasy epic. It is hardly perfect, but *Neverland* has more going for it, and a lot more going on, than other 21st century pre-teen movies like *Bridge to Terabithia* and *The Last Mimzy*.



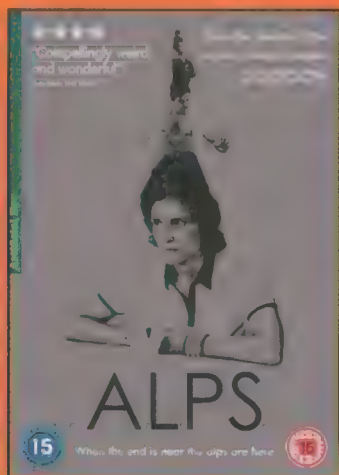
The movie world complains frequently about media piracy leeching away profits but, ironically, the industry itself is maintained by genre copycats and remakes. We have all seen cheap, cheerless imitations of *Star Wars*, *The Terminator*, *Scanners*, *Aliens*, and *The X-Files*, and have probably lost count of the mutants or zombies stalking the corridors of sealed/condemned biotech labs, whether the places are long abandoned or newly contaminated. Such movies have no need to be original, intelligent, or even successful. Their main purpose is simply to provide jobs for the growing multitude of crews and actors, who are generating more disposable product for DVD distributors.

Australian action horror **CRAWLSPACE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 January) is merely adding to an existing stack of movies with

rescue/salvage mission clichés and teams of expendable military surplus cannon fodder. It is a crude, uninventive combination of sci-fi elements that are rather too derivative to take seriously, and will seem quite familiar to anyone who has already seen most of the influential movies cited above. *Scanners* and *Aliens*, in particular, are blatantly referenced for this entirely routine scenario. Several images/action set-pieces in *CrawlSpace* are so eerily reminiscent of *Aliens* that the makers of *CrawlSpace* (first-time director Justin Dix comes from a background in design/special effects) should not be just cautioned, on the grounds of paying dishonest homage to influential favourites, but damned for stealing content. The time for giving a free pass to blatant rip-offs is over.

From the maker of teen gangster noir *Brick* and amusing caper movie *The Brothers Bloom* (*Interzone* #231) comes perplexing genre actioner **LOOPER** (Blu-ray/DVD, 28 January). Essentially, this is about how a time-travel system is banned by authorities but repurposed by crooks for gangster mayhem with indentured hit-men operating under a strict rule of 'suicide' by fixed contractual obligation. Writer-director Rian Johnson fashions a chaotic and often convoluted narrative, rather than a plot with a challenging complexity (like cult SF *Primer*), or even a particularly knotty temporal paradox (as in Spanish mystery thriller *Timecrimes*). *Looper* unpacks with intrigues about identity, faded memory, a wholly unreliable narrator, and is composed with a breathtaking energy but an amusingly erratic sense of pace. The movie tends to rush through its explanations for motives but lingers over quiet moments as if dialogue is less important than mood.

The distinguished main cast is cleverly assembled, using talented performers with significant and relevant science fictional credibility: Bruce Willis (*12 Monkeys*), Joseph Gordon-Levitt



(*Inception*), Emily Blunt (*The Adjustment Bureau*), and Jeff Daniels (*Timescape*). Its slick action is slightly hampered by lens flare (although the gimmicky camerawork is not as badly irritating as in Abrams' *Star Trek* reboot and Wiseman's *Total Recall* remake). But there is another problem. *Looper* is a muddle of genre themes/elements that only work properly when viewers look for, and consider, the subtexts. As a protagonist caught in a kind of recurring anxiety dream, Joe faces a cold, gnawing terror of

his limited lifespan (30 years), and must confront mortality as his future self dreads the terminal meeting with his past self. It is startling to see how Johnson recycles ideas from *The Terminator* and *Back to the Future* into something fresh, with a surprisingly chilling darkness at its core. There is a fearsome portrayal of a dangerous psionic child, mob rule-breakers are subjected to the posse injustice of death squad attacks, and one disturbing scene of physical dissolution has a lingering nightmarish impact.

As a phildickian style text, *Looper* explores psychological aspects of its almost-doppelgänger characters that the likes of *Impositor*, *Minority Report*, *Paycheck*, *Next*, and *Total Recall* rarely aspired to. And yet, Johnson neglects to fully work out his futurism or the eclectic storyline of *Looper* in as much exact detail as any of those supposedly authentic PKD derivatives. Where *Looper* succeeds best is in its depiction of the feel and tone of pulp poetry that made Dick's oeuvre so compelling. Loopy as it is, this plays like a movie version of a 'lost' Dick story: a solidly enjoyable drama with inexplicable tech, druggie sequences, shifting reality as both a threat to sanity and the promise of stability, and plenty of emotional/philosophical resonance – in spite of the obvious fact that the young version of Joe gets very little moral guidance or life advice from his older self. It's almost as if both Joes secretly knew all along that 'their' own timeline, and therefore Joe's polarised existence, must be eradicated, and not in any typically heroic manner. The final scenes present a moral dilemma of the kind that we have not seen handled so astutely and movingly on-screen since *Donnie Darko*.



Fantasy television's favourite dwarf hero Tyrion (Peter Dinklage, *Threshold*) returns in **GAME OF THRONES SEASON 2** (DVD/Blu-ray, 4 March), an adaptation of George R.R. Martin's novel *A Clash of Kings* (*A Song of Ice and Fire*, book two). GoT TV's co-creator David Benioff wrote Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy*, and under Benioff's influence this is more like *Conan* than Tolkien, with a strict minimum of genre tropes, so there is very little to distract us from the large and varied cast. Thankfully, the performers – including lots of British talent – are solidly impressive throughout, although few shine brighter than Lena Headey, who is great, as ever, starring as the Lannisters' queen of Westeros.

Surprisingly, this is superior to the Arthurian revisionism of Michael Hirst and Chris Chibnall's recent *Camelot*, and GoT explores political/tribal conflicts in a dark, superstitious realm of subdued magic/infrequent wonders, but the show wins fantasy fans' interest by challenging our expectations – rejecting a specific formula epitomised by Uli Edel's *Mists of Avalon* and *Sword of Xanten* (aka *Curse of the Ring*) – while offering humorous asides to leaven some grimly fateful dramas of hard-won maturity where compassion and wisdom are nevertheless rare.

In this wintry land of rival kingdoms ruled by decadence and cruelty, honour is prized by the lowly and the elite but loyalties and honesty are as brittle as snowflakes. Gratuitous sex and grisly violence, in the HBO manner that soon became like an adult cartoon on *Spartacus*, actually enhance a gritty style here. And yet, GoT has, I think, insufficient genre content to compete with the numerous recent Asian historical epics (John Woo's magnificent *Red Cliff* in particular), which at least have fighting scenes with a certain fantastic appeal, in marked contrast to battlefield horrors and bedroom kinks.

Here, though, champions and their warrior opponents alike are less chivalrous than is traditional for the knights of lore. Oaths are favoured by the ignorant, freedom has no legacy but exile, final choices for a happy ending are usually limited to burning or drowning, families are typically psychotic, and dragons just...happen. It is a world between ambitions and dreams, where instinctive reactions to an intense atmosphere provide plenty of clever twists in unfolding plots. Many episodes are quite enthralling viewing even though presented on an even broader canvas than before, while comedy and tragedy are fairly evenly balanced for both dungeons and palaces, and the skilled writers and scripting editors avoid confusing viewers when switching from one plot or locale to another.

In the finale, Lord Stannis leads his army against King's Landing. The message seems to be that power does not corrupt, power *is* corruption. What still puzzles me is why does the apparently pivotal character of Jon Snow have such an ordinary name?



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From the maker of *Dogtooth* (*Black Static* #19) comes bizarre drama **ALPS** (DVD, 11 March), in which a group of 'entrepreneurial' individuals play roles as 'substitutes' for dead loved ones to help bereaved people grieve. It's a peculiar satirical comedy drama for clinically practical acting. It's about clinging to memory and regret for inescapable loss. It's a niche venture without a worthwhile story, and so far too unsatisfyingly arty for its own good. David Lynch can do this kind of tilted-world oddity with great skill, but Greek auteur wannabe Giorgos Lanthimos can barely approximate an intellectual rigour, never mind direct performers to display any emotional intensity. Intentionally 'bad' acting is what the script demands apparently, and that's all we really get here. If *Alps* is viewed as some kind of experimental video project, or a movie student's study of how characterisation works in modern cinema, it might be found mildly successful. As a theatrically mindful tragedy about 'ghosts', this attempts to be a realist *Medium*, or a secularist *Ghost Whisperer*, while illogically rejecting any hints of genre content. But even as a product of a European contemporary art house scene, its confusing and frustrating pseudo-academic baggage, rash of directorial quirks and witless imagery of shameless abstraction make it so hard to take very seriously, or even to tolerate for more than five minutes at a time, that *Alps* is not worth the extra climbing effort.

BEST BONDS

Is the British secret agent just a relic of the Cold War, a warrior of our folded empire? In many ways, 007's worldview is almost resolutely dystopian. He's a global export in a dinner suit fighting equally decadent enemies of the status quo. He is deployed with trend-setting futurism of skiffy design to battle *against* any technological supremacy for social upheaval. His seemingly amoral attitudes feed/rely upon paranoia and self-destructive tendencies in others, while actively, and often enthusiastically, celebrating his own sexist loner individuality. He's a movie icon enacting crowd-pleasing bravery, but, in the real world, he'd be a sinister heavy, trained to enforce imperial oppression. So, here's the conundrum of this fantasy: the hero of our dreams is a villain in reality. With a gritty realism that contrasted with the slick adventuring of earlier 007 movies, Martin Campbell's reboot *Casino Royale* proved that James Bond could be portrayed as a flawed human instead of an invincible superhero. But it's vital to remember that Timothy Dalton played this variation first in John Glen's **LICENCE TO KILL** (Blu-ray, 4 February). When I first saw this movie in 1989, the stronger characterisation of Bond instantly made Sean Connery and Roger Moore look simply obsolete.

Dalton was Bond, and it seemed that Connery and Moore were

just playing the role, while, to me, George Lazenby (in *OHMSS*) was only a place-holder star, keeping the premier British agent's series alive until a suitable replacement for Connery could be found to continue this increasingly fantastical franchising into the 1970s. From the excellent stunt work of its title sequence onwards, Dalton's second outing as Bond is a tour de force. He's an edgy and ruthless, steely-eyed avenger without the grace of any save-the-world mission as the framework for his antiheroic exploits. For a change he is as thoroughly dangerous as the villains he faces. Bond's reputation precedes him so well that even a swaggering drug baron like Sanchez (Robert Davi) grows to dread the next attack by such a vigilante.

Drawing upon American hits like the *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard* movies for its primary stylistic influences, *LTK* was the first 007 movie to show its hero as a one-man taskforce. Aiming to bring down a multibillion narcotics empire, this was – and still is – a very modern action thriller if compared to the increasingly dated adventures of Connery and the archly camp comedy routine of Moore. Dalton's Bond is engaged in a deadly personal vendetta, but neither the movie or the actor's characterisation of a renegade hero ever quite falls into a pit of nihilism that so often awaits protagonists (such as *Mad Max*) who embark upon a headlong charge of vengeance in the movies.





Gladys Knight's powerhouse theme song sounds, to my ears, the best for many years, before and after. It's the perfect intro to *LTK*: the most underappreciated Bond movie to date, that, nevertheless, offers progressive fans an expertly mixed cocktail of murder spree, cartel style corruption, vivacious glamour, electrifying stunts, and cool gadgets, plus a genuine action girl in Carey Lowell's ex-CIA agent, who paved the way for later Bond heroines in *Tomorrow Never Dies* and *Die Another Day*. *LTK* delivers a winning combination that topped even my previous favourite Bond movies, Moore's *Moonraker* and Connery's *Never Say Never Again*.

Just like *LTK* borrowed genre elements from *Lethal Weapon* and *Die Hard*, so *Casino Royale* cribbed, somewhat ironically, from Bond's US copycats Jack Bauer (of TV series 24) and the Jason Bourne series. The ongoing absorption of traits from spy game competitors, and factoring in of real world espionage and terrorism, eventually produced **SKYFALL** (Blu-ray/DVD, 18 February). Director Sam Mendes is an unusual choice. He's best known for *American Beauty*, but he seems a safe pair of hands if we consider

his work on period crime thriller *Road to Perdition* (based on a comic book) and biographical war drama *Jarhead*.

Returning from an MIA stint, 'dead' in Turkey, Bond is physically and mentally scarred, and, following a devastating cyber/bomb attack on MI6 HQ, he finds control of the SIS organisation is driven further underground, literally. As Whitehall politico Malory (Ralph Fiennes, John Steed in *The Avengers* remake) is set to usurp M (Judi Dench), while pressuring her to retire, the actor's role here also serves as one of many spy-fi references and subgenre in-jokes. Like Connery in *NSNA*, Daniel Craig's AWOL hero must be tested before winning back his elite status, but he plays up the wounded soldier that appeals to plucky heroine Eve (Naomie Harris, *28 Days Later*) – the new Moneypenny – while he tries to be a potential knight/saviour to the obviously doomed femme fatale Severine.

Crashing into the information age, the whole concept of 'Bond' fails to work, in secret, because nowadays "There are no more shadows". But this assessment of 'black ops' being more technological than personal is contradicted

later, in spite of the scary ingenuity of villainous hacker Silva (Javier Bardem), a betrayed agent out for revenge using simple obfuscation of data for his own security. Overturning *Spooks* TV clichés, and revising Bond's signature ("exemplar of British fortitude") heritage as it goes, this drama of considerably emotive depth sees a committee-beleaguered M quoting from Tennyson to score a contemporary political point, while Bond proves his worthiness – as her staunch defender – right on cue, with a shootout of maximum exhilaration.

There is excellent use of neon and cloudy colours throughout foreign scenes, in China especially, and the jarring shift from a pursuit through subterranean London to Bond's back-to-his-roots getaway (revealing our hero's secret history as an orphan) at his family's manor lodge in Scotland, plays as a postmodern timewarp of metatextual implications. Although *Skyfall* is often a showcase for smoke and mirrors, homemade booby traps instead of sci-fi gadgets, and has Bond quite determined if not very eager to find low-tech solutions to hi-tech problems, the relative sophistication of thematic/self-reverential material explored by Mendes ensures this movie is likely to be hugely enjoyable for every generation of this timeless hero's international fandom.

The presence of both fire and ice in climactic scenes may signify an apocalyptic destruction and the phoenix-like resurrection of a popular/beloved character. *Skyfall* emerges from 50 years of 007 traditions as an immensely exciting thriller with a great criminal mastermind for the 21st century that epitomises a 'brave new world', fielding a dossier of newspeak from the ministry of propaganda on the very best and the worst of British.

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